

Rhythms and the Interstice  
Negotiations of History and Memories through Beirut's Central Square

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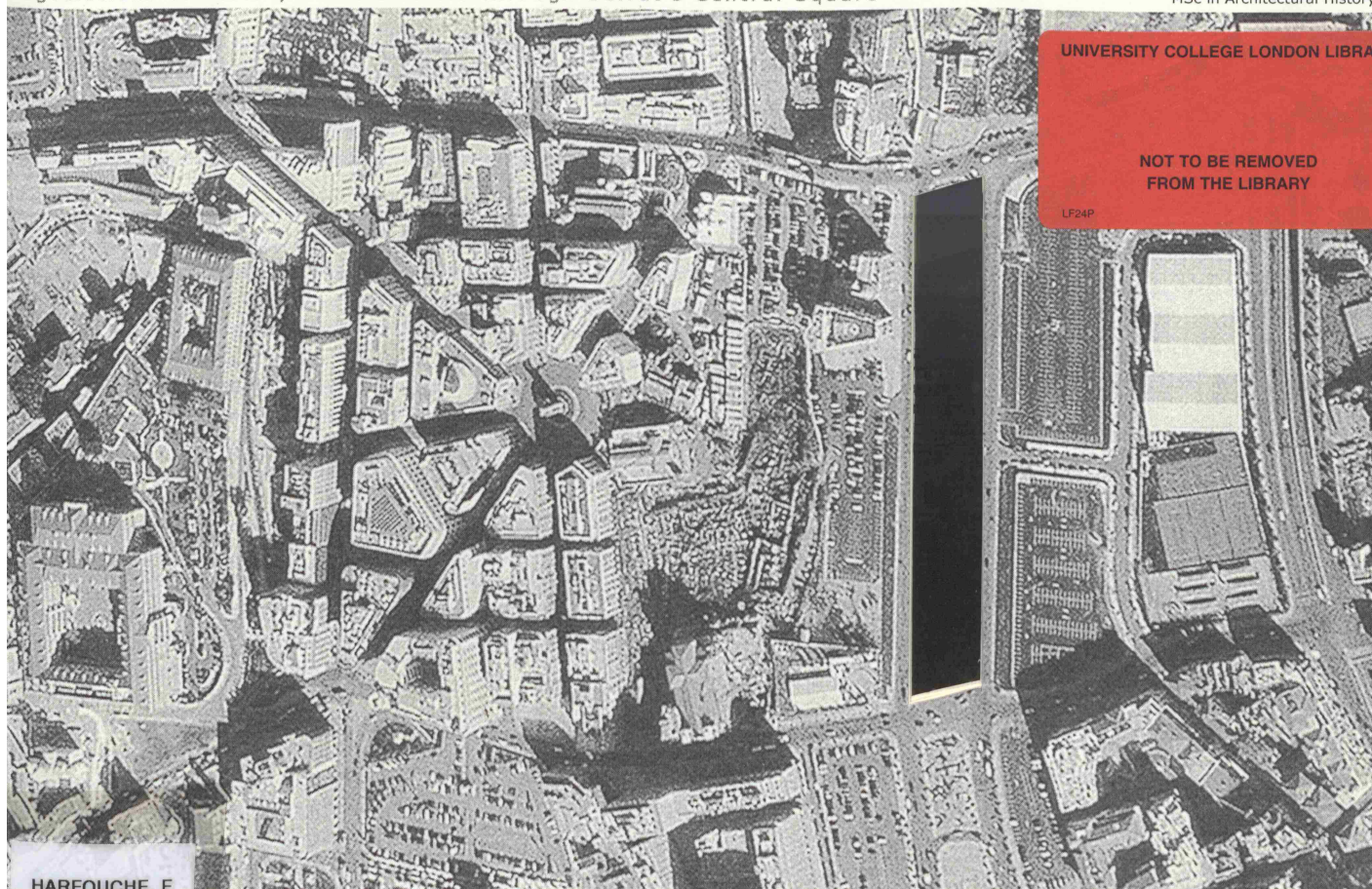
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## abstract

Since its inception, Lebanon was blessed and condemned by two major characteristics: a multi-ethnic population, and a strategic position between the West and the Orient. Both were sources of richness through their negotiations of cultures but were also points of weakness when debates over the historicity and ideology of the country become complicated and cross-cut by ethnic and religious differences and divisions, intertwined with regional affiliations and influences.

The capital Beirut constituted a microcosm of the social fabric. It hosted through its central square negotiations of identities between the various indigenous communities and exposed these either to transitory foreign identities, whether fleeting regional liberals or travellers crossing the square that constituted the harbour's gateway to the Levant, or to more enduring foreign identities through occupation, tutelage or mandate.

Throughout its historical existence, Martyrs square remained a pluralistic space that managed to evade slippage into exclusive hegemony. It was a tolerant meeting ground, unique in a country where consensus amongst the various constitutive communities is a rare commodity, whether in narrative or discursive accounts of historical sites, may they be temporal or spatial.

With its physical destruction during the civil war of 1975-90, the understanding of Martyrs square evolved from physical to mental, from a geometric to a symbolic centre, an imagined one, and earned the label of national landmark. The intense debate surrounding the formal and functional aspects of the reconstruction of this site evidence its symbolism concomitantly to post-war conceptions that the Lebanese are having of themselves, their common history, shared memories, and physical environments.

In simplification of the interpretations advanced behind the symbolism of this site, for the majority revolving around its grandiose collective aspect, whether historical or memorial, we propose that the whole nostalgia does not surpass its 'everyday', the lived, in short its 'rhythms'. Hence, we will try to decipher this symbolism and understand the multiplicity of meanings/interpretations in their underlying complex interplay between history, memory, and identity with and through a physical/mental site, as part of daily rhythmic interaction. To this end we will use the unfinished work of Henri Lefebvre on rhythms, 'Rhythmanalysis', and we will renew interest in the term 'Interstice' through the chronological formal and functional study of Martyrs square.

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#### layout

The cut through the report corresponds with the location of Martyrs square on the aerial photography of Beirut's downtown. It symbolises the interstice between things closely set, in this case the text and its visual representation. Moreover, the transparents that overlay through the cut reflect with their imprinted images the vertical superposition of the historical layers of the interstice.

## introduction

Within the ongoing reconstruction of Beirut after the Civil War (1975-90), a war fought over the historicity and national aspirations of Lebanon, the vague terrain of *el-Bourj* (The Tower: popular label of downtown Beirut), has opened the floodgates for discussions over history, memory, and identity, of which *Sahat el-Bourj* (Tower's Square: popular label of Beirut's main square) was only one, if the most important.

*Sahat el-Bourj*, or *Sahat el-Shouhada* (Martyrs' Square: current official designation of the square) is recognized for being Lebanon's most significant square not only because of its geometrical dimensions and location, but because of the historical relationship between its formal and functional development and that of Beirut as a city-state at first, as a capital along with the emergence of Lebanon as a nation afterwards, then as a divided city along confessional lines in a fragmented country, and finally as a reunited capital in a nation in search for meanings.

Martyrs' square came to embody the only permanence in a city doomed by catastrophes. In fact, this urban *dégagement*<sup>1</sup> is more or less the city's only persistent feature, apart from its relation with the sea, which survived its repetitive destructions and reconstructions due to natural or man-made circumstances.

Martyrs' square, at the heart of Beirut, a layered city, physically through the superposition of occupation layers, socially through the coming together of different communities at different times, and textually through its multiple readings: real, symbolic, and imaginary, inherits the same layering and compiles itself into the city's archival medium in light of its continuity.

This urban theatre hosted and displayed the nation's historical events, the communities' collective memories and their negotiations of identities.

In a process identified as 'representation', Lebanon's image was reduced to Beirut's, and Beirut's image to its downtown and main square; the reverse process conferred to Martyrs square a sense of 'wholeness'. Being in the square meant being in Lebanon, and further on being in the world.



Fig. 1: Southward aerial view of Martyrs square. 1934

<sup>1</sup> 'Dégagement' in French is used here to account for the slight difference between it and its English equivalents. In fact, to the difference of 'vacancy' or 'clearance' *dégagement* signifies a space that was created by pushing away things to its sides in order to allow for things to be placed or events to happen in it. 'Vacant' or 'Clear' don't account for the possibility of containing objects or practices.





Fig. 2: Southward aerial view of Martyrs square. 1950's

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Walkowitz, Daniel J. & Knauer, Lisa Maya (eds), 2004, *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space*, Duke University Press, London, p.4 (Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*; Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*)

Throughout its historical existence it managed to accommodate the interests and host the influences of the different local communities and foreign interventions/occupations while evading slippage into exclusive hegemony. It was a neutral common ground capable of bridging the gaps between the Lebanese and the external powers and amongst the Lebanese themselves. From here stemmed the uniqueness of this site, in a country where consensus amongst the various constitutive communities is a rare commodity, whether in narrative or discursive accounts of historical sites, may they be temporal or spatial, Martyrs' Square stands out as a non contested entity cutting through the multitude of communities' historical and spatial narratives, earning the label of national landmark.

Martyrs square came to be constructed symbolically on a national level in parallel to its physical destruction, close on effacement, since what the war failed to ravage was erased by the *tabula rasa* of the reconstruction plan in the 1990's. The understanding of this site evolved from physical to mental, from a geometric to a symbolic centre, an imagined one. Indeed, nations, as Anderson, Bhabha, Sommer and others have reminded us, are constructed and bound together by imaginative, narrative and symbolic means<sup>2</sup>; ascertaining thus the value of this particular setting. In fact the public interest that the reconstruction of this site is acquiring is concomitant with the post-war conceptions that the Lebanese have of themselves, their common history, shared memories and physical environments.

What triggered the interest in studying this site, other than its status as a part of Lebanese and regional public history, and of millions of locals' and foreigners' private and collective memories, are the socio-political events that swept through Lebanon during February and March 2005, and that had direct reverberations in Martyrs square. The square rose up to the events, managed to reinvent itself to accommodate a changing present, and proved once again for the first time since the end of the war, its embedded ability to host the nation's eventful history.

Many interpretations have been advanced as to why this site was granted such symbolism, for the majority revolving around the collective aspect of the site, whether historical or memorial. What we hope to achieve through this work is to prove that the whole nostalgia regarding this site and the symbolism it is being elevated to, do not surpass the 'everyday' of it, the lived, in short: its 'rhythms'.

Hence, we will try to decipher this symbolism in its underlying complex interplay between history, memory, and identity with and through a physical/mental site, as part of daily interaction, by using the work of Henri Lefebvre on rhythms, 'Rhythmanalysis', and by renewing interest in the term 'Interstice'.

Through Rhythmanalysis Lefebvre tried to show the interrelation of understandings of space and time in the comprehension of everyday life. He was concerned with taking the concept of rhythms and turning it into 'a science, a new field of knowledge: the analysis of rhythms; with practical consequences'.<sup>3</sup>

Interstices, in our opinion are the mental/imaginative and physical/bodily settings for the interrelation of space and time in the everyday. Without claiming to draw a complete theory out of it, we will try propose it as a hypothesis.

In our approach, we will try to evade classic dualities suggested for this site: history/memory, space/place, and move for a more open argument adopting a triadic approach, acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between the 'subject' and the 'object', and with the other subject, the 'other', using/consuming/producing the same object in parts or in whole, in what can be categorized as 'practices'.

The 'subject' and the 'other' in this case being Lebanese individuals of distinct communities each having a rhythmic body composed of biological and social rhythms, inserted in the 'object' that is Martyrs square, subject to different rhythms as well, and itself containing a set of objects not only of physical nature, divided into fixed, semi-fixed objects, and the arrangements between them, but also of eventful nature: historical events and commemoration rituals.

'Subjects', 'others', 'objects' and 'practices' are all consumers of time, they inscribe themselves in its use with their own demands; likewise, they occupy a portion of space. Indeed, as will be proven subsequently, time and space are inherent parts of 'rhythms' and 'interstices'.

Following Lefebvre, rhythm will be used as a mode of analysis, a tool of analysis rather than just an object of it, to understand through the chronological study of the formal and functional evolution of this site, the underlying topographical, geographical, socio-cultural, economic, and historic circumstances for its rise as a public sphere. How it came to be suffused with meaning so vital to Lebanese individual and group identity. How these meanings came into existence,

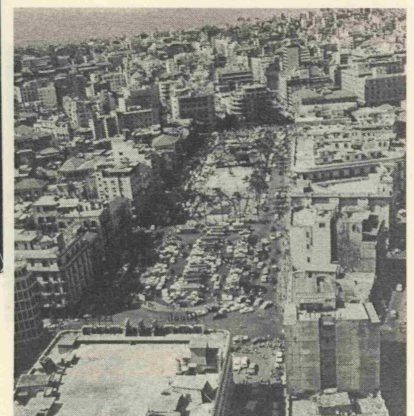


Fig. 3: Southward aerial view of Martyrs square. 1972

<sup>3</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.3





Fig. 4: Southward aerial view of Martyrs square. 1994

<sup>4</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.19

<sup>5</sup> Henri Lefebvre died in 1991 without being able to pursue his study on Rhythmanalysis. The book on Rhythmanalysis was published one year after his death.

<sup>6</sup> The coming together of different rhythms.

persisted and rearticulated through this setting? What are the mythic understandings of it? Hopefully we will be able through studying this ensemble to perceive beyond the formal and functional references the '*vécu du lieu*', the mundane, the everyday.

Having visited Martyrs square with my father in 1990 immediately after the end of the war, and having participated in the events that invested the square in 2005, I was able to appreciate the intricate and dynamic ways in which 'self' and 'space' intertwine and vary along experiential lines. Hence the importance of the corporeal experience, involving the body as the point of contact of biological, social and natural rhythms, will be granted privileged position in the structure of this report. The body will be used as the first point of analysis; it would serve to us as a metronome.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, after the preliminary theoretical hypothesis moving from history/memory to rhythms, and from space/place to interstice, the report will be divided into three parts: 'inside', 'outside', and 'inside and outside' Martyrs square, in which the latter part accounts for the six historical phases of the interstice. This particular structure reflecting the importance of the corporeal experience, and coupling a theoretical approach through/with an exhaustive historical narrative, necessitated pushing slightly the limits of this report.

The following is an experimental project, aiming through the reconsideration of the term interstice and through the usage of the unfinished work of Henri Lefebvre on Rhythmanalysis<sup>5</sup> to re-examine a range of topics related to Martyrs Square, and to articulate a framework through which it would be possible to reconceptualize the relationship between subject, object, practices and Nation building. On the whole this attempt and the choice of its tools aren't the outcome of a fortuitous intention but were inspired by the fact that 'rhythmanalysis', of transdisciplinary character, tries to separate as little as possible the scientific from the poetic. An issue of high importance in studying a setting that is at once real, imaginary and symbolic. Moreover, for Lefebvre, Beirut presented a symbolic case for the study of rhythms.

'It seems to us that Beirut –this extreme case– cannot but take symbolic value. Fifteen or twenty years ago, Beirut was a place of compromise and alliance that today appears miraculous: the place of a polyrhythmia<sup>6</sup> realised in an (apparent) harmony'.

Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, English Translation, Continuum, London, p.100. Originally published as *Éléments de rythmanalyse* by Editions Syllepse, Paris, 1992.



### History/Memory (Identity)/Rhythm

Since the inception of Lebanon as a political entity in 1920 by the French in alliance with the Maronites, a Christian sect of Syrian origins, it fell to them to come forward with historical visions of Lebanon to provide a concept of Lebanese nationality that would be generally acceptable to the various constitutive communities. From the Muslim side, with minor divergences between Sunnite and Shiite, there has been an insistence that whatever history Lebanon can claim for itself is in reality part of a broader Arab history. Yet the notion of what really constitutes Arab history remained confused by the fundamental historical association between Arabism and Islam.<sup>7</sup> An issue that was highly contentious to the Christians. In particular, for the Druze, who were a small Syrian Shiite sect mainly concentrated in Lebanon, Lebanon's history was naturally important, but then again, it had a different account than the one the Christians were promoting.

These diametrically opposed theories of Lebanese history underlined the latent suspicions between the various groups. At several instances local or regional political events placed the struggles over historical interpretations in high relief, breaking out in armed conflict at times (1949-58-61), culminating in the 1975-90 civil war. The ongoing inability to agree on a national curriculum in Lebanese history epitomizes the paralysing effect of national history in a divided country.<sup>8</sup>

In the difficulty of adopting a 'fictional history' entailing concessions to historical claims from the various parties, and in the impossibility of resorting to a 'factual history' due to lack of national archives or other empirical sources of information<sup>9</sup>, the Lebanese are doomed to remain as so many parts, each part forever distrustful of the other, identifying with regional or continental backgrounds for possible sources of support in preparation for yet another round of open conflict. In the absence of empirical evidence, crucial to shifting the reliance on memories and external accounts, the past is remembered, instead of being re-membered.

<sup>7</sup> Salibi, Kamal, 1988, *A House of many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, London, p. 3

<sup>8</sup> Hanssen, Jens-Peter and Genberg, Daniel; 'Beirut in Memoriam: A kaleidoscopic space out of focus' in Neuwirth, Angelika & Pflitsch, Andreas (eds), 2001, *Crisis and Memory in Islamic Societies*, Orient-Institut der DMG, Beirut, p.234

<sup>9</sup> In fact communities' archives, especially those belonging to religious organizations, are the only sources of information more than often contradictory amongst each other.

'The city of Beirut in the historian's narrative is a place that can at time frustratingly appear out of focus since, for various reasons, many of the 'neutral' sources of information are not available. Yet, what appears is the multitude not only of remembrances but also of meanings given to places and events'.<sup>10</sup>

Remembrances and meanings are as multiple as the number of the constitutive Lebanese communities. An insight into the experience of these communities needs to go through the distinction between living and transmitted memory, in which the former is linked with experience and the everyday whereas the latter is prone to manipulation and would be more assimilated as historicized memory. In fact, the living memories of the communities are older than the history of Lebanon itself, only proclaimed independent in 1943. They are transmitted to the younger generation through physical objects, written narratives, discursive accounts, and public or individual commemorative actions, in short Objects and Practices.

'The atomization of memory (as collective/communitarian memory is internalized as private memory) imposes a duty to remember on each individual. This 'law of remembrance' has great coercive force for the individual, the discovery of roots, of 'belonging to some group, becomes the source of identity, its true and hidden meaning. Belonging, in turn, becomes a total commitment'.<sup>11</sup>

With memory becoming a central issue in philosophical thinking with Bergson, psychological thinking with Freud, and in literary work with Proust, a sudden emergence of memory as a central component of individual identity occurred. Nora, in the same tradition, saw that memory is vital to every one of our acts, down to the most quotidian, in order to experience, in an intimate identification of meaning and act, our interaction with our worlds.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, Freud provides a developmental account of the psyche that simultaneously reveals the ways in which people give meaning to their world (of people, events and things) and receive meaning from that world.<sup>13</sup>

'It is by revealing the forces operating in the unconscious that the human behaviour (individual and/or group) can be understood. Crudely, the unconscious is an area of psychological functioning that is not accessible to the *subject*, but which nevertheless has a motivating influence on their everyday lives: their thoughts, feelings, and actions, in other words: rhythms'.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Hanssen, Jens-Peter and Genberg, Daniel; 'Beirut in Memoriam: A kaleidoscopic space out of focus' in Neuwirth, Angelika & Pflitsch, Andreas (eds), 2001, *Crisis and Memory in Islamic Societies*, Orient-Institut der DMG, Beirut, p.232

<sup>11</sup> Nora, Pierre, English Language edition edited by Kritzman, Lawrence D., 1996, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, Columbia University Press, New York, Volume 1, p.11

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Pile, Steve, 1996, *The Body and the City: psychoanalysis, space and subjectivity*, Routledge, London, p.8

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.7

Rhythm in everyday life is the final expression of a subject's thoughts, feelings, and actions. In short, his identity. Rhythm is his unconscious symbiosis between notions of his past, historicized and living memory, governing his interaction with the Other -himself a rhythmic entity as well, understanding of Objects -inscribed in space and time, and performances through Practices - commemorative or utilitarian. Interactions, understandings, and performances entail notions as crucial as national aspirations but also as trivial as day to day encounters. Therefore they influence politics of formation of groups, alliances, and power relations amongst these. In their turn, these forms of alliances which humans give themselves determine the social, the collective rhythm.<sup>15</sup>

If as so for established, rhythm and identity are interchangeable, than collective rhythm can inherit the definition of collective identity advanced by Halbwachs. For him, collective identity was founded on memory, which bound groups of people together, recharging their commonality by reference to the physical spaces and previous instances. In other words, urban memory. Urban memory as understood by Marc Crinson projects 'the city as a physical landscape and collection of objects and practices that enable recollections of the past and that embody the past through traces of the city's sequential building and rebuilding'.<sup>16</sup> It follows that Identity, and therefore rhythms, are the sum of all these traces, including their mental recollections and imaginary reconstructions. Hence real/imaginary traces constitute our identity, our rhythm, through physical/mental contexts. Walter Benjamin affirmed the cohesive relation between identity and context but failed to account for its temporal facet. A notion that would be pursued by Lefebvre for whom rhythm and temporalised space are inseparable.

'...all rhythms imply the relation of a time to a space, a localised time, or, if one prefers, a temporalised space. Rhythm is always linked to such and such a place, to its place, be that the heart, the fluttering of the eyelids, the movement of a street or the tempo of a waltz'.<sup>17</sup>



<sup>15</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.94

<sup>16</sup> Crinson, Mark, 2005, *Urban Memory: History and amnesia in the modern city*, Routledge, New York, Introduction

<sup>17</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.89



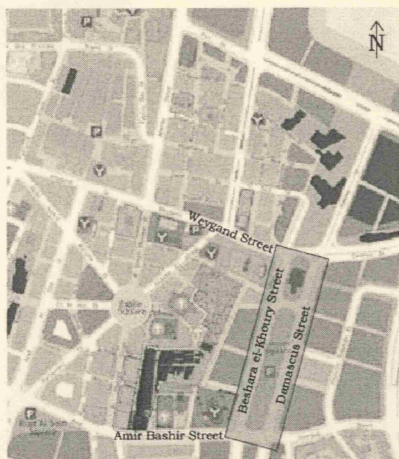


Fig. 5: Plan of Martyrs square

#### Space/Place (*lieu de mémoire*)/Interstice

'Space', 'localised time', 'temporalised space', 'such and such a place', and 'its place', as used by Lefebvre in the previous quote, are but a small sample of the panoply of spatial connotations that are available for use to us.

However, judging the complexity of readings and multiplicity of meanings that Martyrs square and its context embody, we are forced to be very circumspect in our choice for its designation. So far in this work, the words 'setting' and '*dégagement*' have been used to designate Martyrs square, the former a complex term underlying a set of factors and the latter a simple one denoting the ground of possible settings, an urban vacancy. However, both are neutral terms that can touch on Martyrs square historical existence but never exhaust its meaning.

What is this setting located between the historical centre and the new city, between the Muslim West and the Christian East, between the Orient and the West, extending currently from Amir Bashir street in the south to Weygand street in the north, and delimited by Beshara el-Khoury street on its western side and by Damascus Street on its eastern side. (Fig. 5)

What is Martyrs square? A space, a place, a '*lieu de mémoire*'?

'It (space) is an all-purpose nostrum to be applied whenever things look sticky'.<sup>18</sup>

In light of the contemporary vogue of proliferation of spatial typologies and interpretations, the usage of a spatialised vocabulary is revealing to be more problematic than ever. The problem is not so much that space means very different things –what concepts do not–, as Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift state in *Thinking Space*<sup>19</sup>, but that it is used with much abandon that its meanings run into each other before they have been properly interrogated. For them, even Lefebvre fell prey to inventing an infinite number of spatialities, all of equal significance rendering the panoply counter-productive.

Lefebvre's work in this regard was both conceptual –the threefold distinction between spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation– and historical, with discussion of abstract, absolute, relative and concrete space.<sup>20</sup> The historical study depicts space's relation to time, that Lefebvre understood as non-calculable, as resistant to abstracting generalisations, and in need of being understood as 'lived'. Space is not a neutral medium that stands outside of its conception, its evolution needs to be studied chronologically alongside other disciplines, which

<sup>18</sup> Crang, Mike & Thrift Nigel, 2000, *Thinking Space*, Routledge, London, p.1

<sup>19</sup> Crang, Mike & Thrift Nigel, 2000, *Thinking Space*, Routledge, London

<sup>20</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 1974, *La production de l'espace*, Anthropos, Paris ; translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith as *The production of Space*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991

treat space differently. Moreover, Lefebvre was unproblematic in the relation of space with other notions, like 'place'; at many instances in his writing, 'place' was inserted next to spatial connotations denoting a certain difference, that was never specified.

'...place' is a space or setting + X'.<sup>21</sup>

What is the 'X' and what are the extreme definitions of it covering our understanding of place?

On the one hand, for Amos Rapoport, the 'X' refers to a set of relationships between people and various systems of settings, whether these are sacred sites, landscapes, dwelling or neighbourhoods; a city or country or a work setting – or objects in these.<sup>22</sup> However, one person's 'place' is another person's 'non-place' and the meaning of 'place' can be so culturally and sub-culturally variable as to be indefinable, non-scientific, and he argues, therefore irrelevant.

Barry Curtis, on the other hand, exchanges the 'X' for memory, and therefore 'experience' as the factor that distinguishes place from space. Nevertheless as already discussed, memory can be constituted through bodily experience -living memory, or internalized through external mediums - historicized memory. In short physical or reconstituted frames of memory; real or imaginative. In this sense, memory cannot be a reliable medium in the distinction between 'space' and 'place'. Moreover, spatialities draw on a relationship between the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic that is not beyond truth and falsity, but is different from them.<sup>23</sup> Symbolic space/place runs the entire gamut from the most primal to the most intellectual. On the primal level, we must remember that our very sense of being in this world is irrevocably linked with a sense of body space.<sup>24</sup> The most intellectual, or more intellectual would be the notion of *lieu de mémoire* elaborated by Pierre Nora.

'If memory places are symbolic in nature, it is because they signify the context and totemic meaning from which collective identity emerges'.<sup>25</sup>

Collective identity then and therefore collective rhythm, emerge from the memory places that were defined by Nora as 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time, has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community'.<sup>26</sup> In this sense memory places came close to De Certeau's spaces of 'fortuitous creation' to the opposite of 'consciously formed', spaces that become constructed

<sup>21</sup> Rapoport, Amos, 'A Critical Look at the Concept "Place"', in Singh, Rana P.B. (eds), 1994, *The Spirit and Power of Place. Human Environment and Sacrality*, National Geography Society of India, Varanasi, India, p.39

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.1

<sup>23</sup> Keith, Michael & Pile Steve (eds), 1993, *Place and the Politics of Identity*, Routledge, London, p.9

<sup>24</sup> Etlin, Richard, 1994, *Symbolic Space: French Enlightenment Architecture and its Legacy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p.

<sup>25</sup> Nora, Pierre, English Language edition edited by Kritzman, Lawrence D., 1996, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, Columbia University Press, New York, In Remembrance of Things French, ix

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. xvi



symbols, or if imposed at first, are re-constructed differently by their users. '*Lieux de mémoire* are complicated things. At once natural and artificial, simple and ambiguous, concrete and abstract, they are *lieux* –places, sites, causes- in three senses: material, symbolic and functional'.<sup>27</sup> Again Nora, like Lefebvre over exhausted the panoply of spatial vocabulary: *lieux*, places, sites, etc, which rendered *lieux de mémoire* a brand name that meant everything and anything at the same time.

While many of the qualities of 'space', 'place', and '*lieux*' may be transposed on to Martyr's square, the free floating signification in the usage of these terms, at worst limitative and at best endless as to be indefinable, forces us to try and tie down a different designation more relevant the particularities of the site. Hence to counter the elusive concepts mentioned above, we will try to renew interest in an existing but in our opinion, undervalued term: Interstice.

No space remains the same over time, no time is experienced the same way spatially, and 'interstice' can account for this complex interplay between space and time.

Interstice would be able to satisfy the lacking temporal dimension in the study of space, evade the subjectivity of the qualification of place, and avoid the branding of *lieu de mémoire*.

Moreover, the specificity of Martyrs square's context in regards to the frequency of its physical destruction and reconstruction, and the variety of its interpretations and meanings overlapping in the Subject, rendering the subject and the object in perpetual spatial and temporal suspension, can be covered by the term 'interstice'.

A dictionary entry for the word interstice gives two meanings:

1-That which intervenes between one thing and another; especially, a space between things closely set, or between the parts which compose a body; a narrow chink; a crack; a crevice; a hole; an interval; as, the interstices of a wall.

2-An interval of time; in the plural, the intervals which the canon law requires between the reception of the various degrees of orders.

Interstices are both temporal and spatial, always suspended between entities: Subjects, Others, Objects, Practices, past and future, meaning and significance, reality and imagination.

Moreover, what is the body but an interstice between the self and the outside, between the subject and the object, between biological, social and natural rhythms?

<sup>27</sup> Nora, Pierre, English Language edition edited by Kritzman, Lawrence D., 1996, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, Columbia University Press, New York, Volume I, p.14



### Rhythms and the Interstice, and the Rhythmanalyst

'Noise. Noises. Rumours (*Murmures*). When rhythms are lived and blend into another, they are difficult to make out. Noise, when chaotic, has no rhythm. Yet, the alert ear begins to separate, to identify sources, bringing them together, perceiving interactions'.

Lefebvre, Henri, 1996, *Writing on Cities*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, p.219

Lebanon is a noisy entity; however its cacophony doesn't derive solely from the auditory and visual realms of its urban environment, but from the chaos of its historical interpretations, lived presences, and future aspirations, in short identities and therefore rhythms.

In the field of rhythms, the concept of 'repetition' is of particular importance. No rhythm without repetition in time and space, without *reprises*, without returns.<sup>28</sup> But there is no absolute identical repetition, such a thing is only a fiction of mathematical and logical thought. Whence the relation between repetition and 'difference'.

To the repetitive destruction of Beirut, the interstice introduced itself as the difference, the permanent but not the same.

The concept of repetition encloses two categories: the 'cyclical repetitive' and the 'linear repetitive'. They separate out under analysis but in reality interfere with one another constantly. The cyclical originates in the cosmic, in nature: days, nights, seasons, the waves and tides of the sea, monthly cycles, etc. The linear would rather come from social practice, therefore from human activity, the monotony of actions and of movements, imposed structures.<sup>29</sup>

The 'everyday' establishing itself, creating hourly demands, systems of transport, in short its repetitive organisation; is the scene of the cyclical and the linear and suffers from their antagonistic unity, which sometimes give rise to compromises, sometimes to disturbances.

Moreover, the everyday is the scene of social time, or collective rhythm, which is determined by the forms of 'alliances' that subjects and groups give themselves. To the persistence of these social relations amongst communities and their resurgence in Lebanon, explications in terms of ancient history or in the survival of peasant customs appear insufficient.

<sup>28</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.6

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.8

'Codes' and 'rites' however function durably, more or less tacitly; they mark time as they do relations. Rites have a double relation with rhythms. Each ritualisation creates its own time and particular rhythm, that of gestures, solemn words, and acts prescribed in a certain sequence; and also ritualisations intervene in the everyday time, punctuating it. This occurs most frequently in the course of cyclical time, at fixed hours, dates or occasions.<sup>30</sup>

Several sorts of rites punctuate everydayness:

- Religious rites, they intervene in everyday life at different times between Christians and Muslims through fasting, prayers, ablutions, the muezzin, the angelus, etc. Rites of the Subject and the Other punctuate reciprocally but differently the everyday.
- Political rites, namely ceremonies, commemorations, etc. Not always consensual in Lebanon, they are often exclusionary and therefore disruptive of the Other's rhythm.
- Rites in the broadest sense, sacred and/or profane such as festivals and carnivals, but also rites of intimate convivialities or external sociability. Source of richness but also of conflict when closely enacted between different communities.

Everything that impresses upon the everyday an extra-everyday rhythm without interrupting it in so doing, enters into this category.<sup>31</sup>

A further paradox: rhythm seems natural, spontaneous, with no law other than its unfurling. Yet rhythm, always particular, (music, poetry, dance, gymnastics, work, etc.) always implies a 'measure'. Even though rhythm has its own and specific measure: speed, frequency, consistency, we know that a rhythm is slow or lively only in relation to other rhythms, often our own: those of our walking, our breathing, our heart, but also those of our social environments. Every study of rhythms is necessarily comparative.<sup>32</sup>

Our reference then is our 'body', constituted of a bundle of rhythms, all different but in tune.

The notion of rhythm brings with it or requires some complementary considerations: the different notions of polyrhythmia, isorhythmia, eurhythmia and arrhythmia. Starting with the lived, they are elevated to a theoretical level.

Polyrhythmia is the coming together of different rhythms, of which the 'body' would be the metonym on the smaller level, and the 'everyday' on the larger level. Isorhythmia is the equality of rhythms, mutually exclusive with eurhythmia, where rhythms unite with one another in the

<sup>30</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.94

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.94

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p.91

state of health, in normal everydayness. When rhythms are discordant, there is suffering, a pathological state defined as arrhythmia acting simultaneously as symptom, cause, and effect. The Lebanese Civil war is one but exemplary case of arrhythmia, and any attempt at preventing future inter-communal deregulations would have to start by an analysis of rhythms.

'The analysis of these multiple rhythms would, we claim, enable us to verify that the relation of the townsman to his town does not only consist in the sociological relation of the individual to the group; it is on the one hand a relation of the human being with his own body, with this tongue and his speech, with his gestures within a certain place, with an ensemble of gestures – and on the other hand, a relation with the largest public space, with the entire society and, beyond this with the universe'.<sup>33</sup>

The Subject's relation with his own body, speech, and gestures, accordingly to the specificity of the 'place', the context, is enacted in the interstice. In fact, the relationship between the needs and expressions of the 'self' and the reality of an 'otherness', in other words the 'rhythm of the self' and 'rhythm of the other' interact and function in a system founded on exteriority that could be used as a foil and a counterpoint helping to achieve relative identification and measure in presence of the Other.

The Self and the Other are not cut off from one another, multiple imbrications exist between them, complex reciprocities between the public and the private. 'In and around the body, the distinction between two sorts of rhythms is found as far as in movements, mannerisms and habits: and this is from the everyday to the extra-everyday. Entangled with one another, they penetrate practice and are penetrated by it. This seems to us true of all times and spaces, urban or not.

'It seems to us that in them (Mediterranean cities), urban, which is to say public, space becomes the site of a vast staging where all these relations with their rhythms show and unfurl themselves. Rites, codes and relations make themselves visible here: they act themselves out here (*s'y miment*)'.<sup>34</sup>

In short, the interstice is the ground on which momentary and ever-shifting lines are drawn between inside and outside, past and present, present and future, oppressor and oppressed, the Same and the Other, repetition and difference. Scene of the everyday, it is traversed by cosmic and vital rhythms (day and night, the months and the seasons), biological rhythms, and still more precisely social rhythms impressed by the extra-everyday.

<sup>33</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.95

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p.95



Acting as a rhythmanalyst, and having experienced the real, imaginary, and symbolic of the interstice, I will travel back in time, oscillating between lived and abstracted temporalities, carrying my only handicap: that of my current point of reference in the study of historical rhythms. The comparative, not substantial study of the interstice's rhythms with its surroundings will undermine this handicap. I will be 'more sensitive to times than to spaces, to moods than to images, to the atmosphere than to particular events'.<sup>35</sup>

Attentive to repetitions and differences I will try to separate that which gives itself as associated to a whole, namely rhythms and interactions. 'The rhythmanalyst thus knows how to listen to a square, a market, an avenue'.<sup>36</sup>

'...to capture a rhythm one needs to have been *captured* by it. One has to *let go*, give and abandon oneself to its duration. Just as in music or when learning a language, one only really understands meanings and sequences by *producing* them, that is, by producing spoken rhythms.

Therefore in order to *hold* this fleeting object, which is not exactly an *object*, one must be at the same time both inside and outside'.

Lefebvre, Henri, 1996, *Writing on Cities*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, p.219

<sup>35</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.87

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p.89

'This *object* is not inert; time is not set aside for the *subject*. It is only slow in relation to our time, to our body, the measure of rhythms'.

Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, English Translation, Continuum, London, p.20. Originally published as *Éléments de rythmanalyse* by Editions Syllepse, Paris, 1992.



Martyrs square during the Civil War (1975-90)  
Source: [www.cmylebanon.com](http://www.cmylebanon.com)

outside

(1975-89-2005)

After the cessation of hostilities in 1989, the dismantlement of the demarcation lines, and the reunification of the capital, the Lebanese flocked to the devastated area of the *el-Bourj*, their pre-war common meeting place. They were driven by nostalgia and intrigue, in need to physically witness the devastation in the geographical location of the *el-Bourj* they had previously produced, used, and consumed differently.

I had never visited the downtown, or Martyrs square. Born in 1975, date of the start of the civil war, these two locations have always been physically inaccessible to me. Instead, I knew of their geographical existence through the mention of their names on radio news flashes amongst sites where military actions were being conducted. My mental image of them was the outcome of two sources: postcards printed by the ministry of tourism hanging on our house walls and related discursive accounts of my parents and neighbours shared either in normal social gatherings or under shelling in shelters. These sources produced my 'expectation' towards the physical space.

My father and I were amongst the visiting flocks, a visit that made me experience the intricate and dynamic ways in which Subject and Object intertwine. Beyond the intrinsic character of the Object, my father brought his 'knowledge' of the site along on the visit, while I went with 'expectations'.

'The quality of a place depends on a human context shaped by memories and expectations, by stories of real and imagined events –that is, by the historical experience located there'.<sup>37</sup>

My historical knowledge of the interstice was limited; any intentional importance I attached to it was through the internalization of the transmitted external accounts as historicised memories.



Fig. 6: Martyrs square. 1977

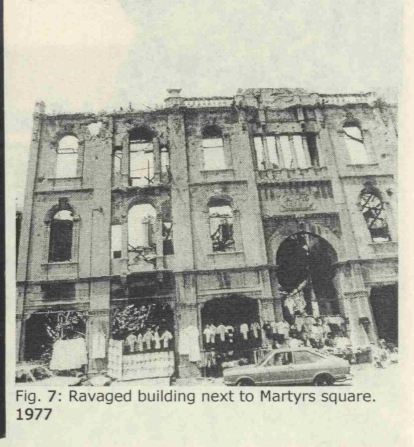


Fig. 7: Ravaged building next to Martyrs square. 1977

<sup>37</sup> Walter, Eugène V., 1988, *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment*, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Quoted in Singh, Rana P.B. (eds) 1994, *The Spirit and Power of Place. Human Environment and Sacrality*, National Geography Society of India, Varanasi, India, p.8





Fig. 8: Martyrs memorial taking its share of the war 1990

I was indifferent to the few remaining physical markers on the site acting as memory triggers to my father, whom was consuming the interstice, enduring an overlapping of images, lived imagined, and real. He was particularly moved by the sight of Martyrs memorial, still standing there, bullets-ridden with one of its characters having lost an arm. (Fig. 8)

'We feel a visceral attachment to that which made us what we are, yet at the same time we feel historically estranged from this legacy, which we must now coolly assess'.<sup>38</sup>

I was bodily inside the interstice but subjectively outside; my experience of the site was that of an inert Object, unmeaningful and insignificant, devoid of rhythms.

It is only now, through rhythmanalysis and looking back beyond the mere appearance of the simultaneity of the site, that I apprehend its polyrhythmia, the apparent immobility that contained one thousand and one movements. Nothing inert in the world, no things: very diverse rhythms, slow or lively (in relation to us).<sup>39</sup>

I had confused silence with absence, in a country where silences speak best, that which is forbidden from being said, be it external or intimate.

Whereas the reconstruction of the downtown area was initiated almost immediately after the war, and because of the intense debate around its new formal and functional aspects, the interstice, at the heart of the reconstruction scheme, was raised to the ground level awaiting its final design proposal, subject of an international ideas competition, only to be held in 2004. Meanwhile, it remained an empty plot, an interstice between two newly enlarged roadways, stripped out of its memorial moved away for repair. It swept silently into absence from the everyday of the population amidst the gigantic reconstruction site of Beirut, only to be awakened on 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Nora. Pierre, English Language edition edited by Kritzman, Lawrence D., 1996, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, Columbia University Press, New York, Volume I, p.7

<sup>39</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.17

'There is a long way to go from an observation to a definition, and even further from the grasping of some rhythm (of an air in music, or of respiration, or of the beatings of the heart) to the conception that grasps the simultaneity and intertwinement of several rhythms, their unity in diversity'.

Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, English Translation, Continuum, London, p.77. Originally published as *Eléments de rythmanalyse* by Editions Syllepse, Paris, 1992.



Northwards view upon Martyrs square on 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2005.

Source: [www.cmylebanon.com](http://www.cmylebanon.com)

inside

(14<sup>th</sup> March 2005)

14<sup>th</sup> of March 2005 is the day in which I witnessed the power of a political event to reshape the meanings we impose upon or derive from a public setting.

After the failed attempt against Marwan Hamadeh, a Druze MP, in October 2004, and the assassination of Raffic Hariri, the Muslim Sunnite Prime Minister, on 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2005, the Sunnite and Druze finally joined hands with the Christians, who had been calling for Syria, the main suspect in both assassinations, to withdraw from Lebanon hereby ending a 15 years long hegemony.

The emotionally charged gathering surpassed all norms the country's has witnessed both in numbers and form. Almost one quarter of the country's entire population, including me, carpeted the site of Martyrs square filling any kind of spatial vacancy.

It was a hybrid congregation combining all the sectarian and regional communities, most visible in their outward demeanour, slogans and placards, and the rich diversity of dress codes: from traditional horsemen in Arab headscarves, and clerics in their distinctive robes and turbans to young girls with bared midriffs and pierced navels. But the most resounding image was the red, white and green hues of the Lebanese flag. This was one event in the history of the country when such a unifying and patriotic national symbol transcended all other segmental and sub-national loyalties.<sup>40</sup> (Fig. 9)

The coming together of these multiple rhythmic entities into a polyrhythmia, tuning frequencies in the interstice, eurhythmically voiced dissent against the sources undermining the sovereignty, resources, and well being of their country. Bodies, flags, murmurs, were radiating from the site building intricate patterns of power, meaning, and identity across and through the interstice.

I was captured by the polyrhythmia; spatio-temporally different from the one that seduced my father long before, but nevertheless certifying of the power of this interstice to re-invent itself conformingly to a changed present, generating captivating rhythms in the memory of its

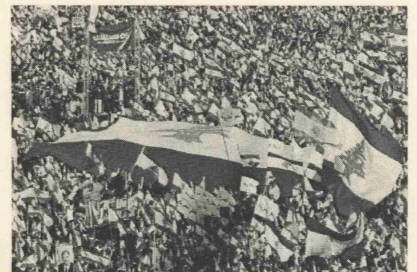


Fig. 9: Demonstration in Martyrs square on 14<sup>th</sup> of March. 2005

<sup>40</sup> Khalaf, Samir, 2006, *Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj*, Saqui Books, London, p. 16



users/consumers/producers.

In fact, the geographical location and cyclical (natural) rhythms were historically the same; however, the spatial boundaries and social rhythms were different. My living memory of the inert interstice that I had visited a few years before was undergoing a second reading. The inherited imaginary, the consumed reality, and finally the lived symbolism were overlapping. I was constantly located, dislocated and relocated by the tensions between my senses, thoughts and feelings about the scene that I was consuming/producing. Indeed, 'all information is inspired, edited, and distorted by feeling'.<sup>41</sup>

We were all experiencing the same physical realm; however the meaning was drawn out in so many different ways. It depended on each Subject's expectation, knowledge, and his experience of his body governing his abilities/limitations of spatial/social interpretations. Therefore the symbolisation of the spatio-temporal acquired different readings.

I was there not in abstract, but in lived temporality experiencing through my body as a rhythm analyst, expectation, knowledge, and self presence. Suddenly, my father's previous reaction to this physical environment was more comprehensible; the event redefined my notions of how contemporary social actors accede to understanding both the past and monuments that were erected in another era.

In this meeting of 'agents' (Subjects, Objects, and Practices), an interstice was psychologically constructed in me which would be the root for subsequent modelling through divulging into its past, and imagining its future. The interstice became intensely social in the following weeks, animated by uninterrupted flow of people coming to mourn<sup>42</sup>, debate and protest.

From thereon, I felt empowered to share in the debate about the reconstruction of this interstice, and intrigued to expand my historical knowledge of it; issues that had left me indifferent up until that point.

<sup>41</sup> Lowenthal, David (ed), 1961, *The West Indies Federation: Perspectives on a New Nation*, Columbia, p.257

<sup>42</sup> Since the assassinated Prime Minister was buried in a plot adjacent to Martyrs Square.

## inside and outside (6000 BC-2006)

I have been captured by the rhythm of the interstice, I have been outside, inside, and outside again, but differently. From here Martyrs square is depicted in all its aspects, real, symbolic, and imaginary; its visible and invisible layers resurface. It is seen ancient and modern, Roman, Arab, Ottoman, French, traditional and creative, active and idle.

Images accumulated through visual, discursive, narrative, and experiential mediums, combine in a juxtaposition of interpretations and meanings, throwing me in a state of oscillation between experience and imagination, between living and historicized memory, and history; between objectivity, which is none than the subjectivity of others, and my own subjectivity.

One cannot understand the emergence of a particular public sphere without placing it in its proper historical framework. A brief historical sketch of Beirut, tracing the history of the site until the possible origins of the square, therefore, will enable us to view Martyrs Square's development within this broader historical context.

To a considerable extent, the history of Beirut is the history of various groups who either conquered the city or sought refuge in one of its communities. In this sense, its urban development in a uni-nuclear structure with various distinct communities developing around its traditional core - the fortified medieval city, is intimately associated with external events and exogenous forces which shaped its physical structure and its importance as a commercial and cultural centre.

The construction of the clock tower of Beirut in 1898 by the Ottoman Sultan after the repeated requests of the Muslims who were complaining from the absence of public clocks showing Islamic

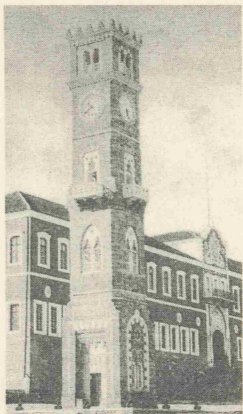


Fig. 10: Ottoman clock tower. 1898

Times in the city, is of interest because it shows how religions inserted themselves temporally and spatially in the city and fragmented its everyday.

Creative and judicious use of eclecticism was opted for in the design in response to the already marked cultural and sectarian divisions within the city; hence the imposing clock tower was neo-Ottoman in more than one respect. Two of the faces of the clock tower gave the '*alla franco*' hour, while the other two gave the '*alla Turca*' hour, four large clock-faces had been imported from Paris by the Ottoman embassy, two clock faces with Arabic and two with Latin numerals, hence satisfying the Christians and the Muslims of the city. (Fig. 10)

Beirut functioned under the same quantitative time but qualitatively different under cosmic times. It was a city for everyone and everything.

The Canaanites, later called Phoenicians by the Greeks, were the first community of settlers around Beirut in 4000 B.C., one of the oldest cities on the Phoenician coast. The site has hosted the world's most vibrant civilisations as proven by repeated archaeological findings.

The earliest written information on Beirut is found in the Tell el-Amarna tablets discovered in Egypt in 1887. Beirut, like the rest of Phoenicia, had been under Egyptian rule since the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty (1580 B.C. onwards), and the tablets constitute the correspondence between its vassal Ammunira and the Egyptian pharaohs, in which he mentions Beirut's strong defences and prosperity.

One important aspect of Beirut is the recurrent destructions it endured. To the persistence of this historical trait, its maintenance, rhythms –historical, but also everyday, the lived, are not innocent. The following chronological analysis will not try to isolate a subject or an object or a relation, but will seek to grasp a moving but determinate complexity: rhythms and the interstice.



## 1

64 BC	-	560	AD Roman Rule
634	-	1100	First Islamic Rule
1110	-	1291	Crusaders Rule
1291	-	1520	Mamluk Rule
1520	-	1840	Early Ottoman Rule

As an imposing Roman colony, built over the urban grid of the Hellenistic city, and named after the daughter of the Emperor Augustus in 15 BC, *Julia Augustus Felix Berytus*, Beirut would be developed in function and form. It is thus laid out in an orthogonal plan with two main axes, the *Decumanus maximus* and the *Cardo Maximus* intersecting at the crossroad of the city and dividing it into the four quarters which prefigured much of its subsequent layout. Most importantly was its prominence as an intellectual arena, partly due to its Roman School of Law that radiated between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The function of Martyrs square site at the Roman era is obscure. We know that the northern part of the site, slightly higher than the prolongation towards the south, had long been used as burial ground, as ascertained by the accounts of the Arabs who later occupied Beirut. Another less verified assumption proposes the location of the roman hippodrome on the site, and that the gentle slopes, visible on some maps are the traces of the *spina* or the steps.

At the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Beirut was a small village, of which the ruins still testified to the horrible tidal wave accompanying a series of earthquakes that devastated it in 551 rendering its acquisition fairly easy to the Arabs who finally established themselves in it starting 640. Sea trade beginning around the 10<sup>th</sup> century helped to establish Beirut as a port city on the Mediterranean sea, and encouraged the building of its surrounding walls.

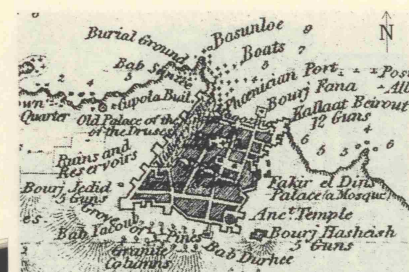


Fig. 11: Beirut and its environment by the English Marine in 1840

*Bourj el Kashef* is named *Bourj Hasheish*. Fakhr el-Din's palace is mentioned but not clearly located inside or outside of the city's walls.

<sup>1</sup> The historical account of Beirut and the emergence of Martyrs square is inspired from three sources:  
Guerin, Isabelle, 1996, *La Place des Martyrs à Beyrouth : Recherche Historique Préliminaire à l'Aménagement de la Place dans le Cadre de la Reconstruction du Centre Ville de Beyrouth*, Prepared for SOLIDERE, Beirut.  
Khalaf, Samir, 2006, *Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj*, Saqui Books, London  
Tuéni, Ghassan & Sassine, Farès (eds), 2000, *el-Bourj: Place de la Liberté et Porte du Levant*, Edition Dar An-Nahar, Beyrouth  
Notes will be added only when information is used from other sources.

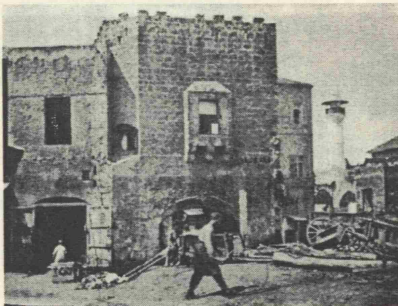


Fig. 12: Bab el-Saraya

In the series of the Crusades. Beirut was captured by Baldwin the 1<sup>st</sup> in 1110, and established as a colony of the 'Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem'. However, it remained vulnerable to attacks by Arabs, changing hands many times, its fortunes rising and falling according to trade with Europe in spices and silk.

In 1187, the city was taken over by Salah el-Din for a few years before his death to fall back in the hands of the Crusaders until 1291, when the Arab Mamluks seized it along with the rest of the region. Beirut had to wait until the 15<sup>th</sup> century to affirm itself as a commercial metropolis and see its walls re-erected and its port rehabilitated by the Mamluks to promote the installation of traders and to ensure their security.

Beirut was a small walled city of rectangular shape extending from the sea to its southern wall, with its longer eastern wall skirting current Martyrs square without enclosing it, and would conserve this particular physiognomy until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The Medieval texts conceal the usage of the site of Martyrs square, allowing us to presume its exploitation for agricultural ends, either as orchards to insure proximity food reserve, or as mulberry plantations since silk production constituted the bulk of Beirut's commerce and craft industry. The possibility of it being nothing else than a vast terrain for military purposes can't be ruled out as well.

Beirut entered into the Ottoman Empire starting 1516 with the defeat of the last Mamluk Sultan; and suffered neglect and commercial decline due to the creation of the new Indian trade route passing to the north of Syria.

The city was only awakened by the return from exile in the court of Florence of Fakhr el-Din the 2<sup>nd</sup>, a Druz emir who made it his winter residence. He built his palace in the north-west side of the site next to *Bab el-Saraya* (Seraglio Gate) (Fig. 12); inspired by Florentine building design and landscaped gardening. Moreover in 1632 he renovated *Bourj el-Kashef* (Lookout Tower), the tower after which the square takes its most popular designation, *Sahat el-Bourj*.

According to many travellers who had visited Beirut, the palace and its gardens of unprecedented refinement occupied part or whole of the actual site of Martyrs square. However isn't it unorthodox to have a palace and its dependences outside of the city walls, in prey to potential attacks?

In fact, no iconographic plan of the palace and its gardens confirming their location has been discovered to this day. The certification remains torn between the appreciation of contemporary literature and the scientific analysis of two centuries older cartography.

The site extending from *Bab el-Saraya* (Seraglio Gate) in the north to the *Bourj el-Kashef* in the south could have been used as a field of manoeuvres for the cavalry or *Meidan* (Field), a strip of vacant land skirting the external side of the fortifications reserved for defence, marches and military parades.

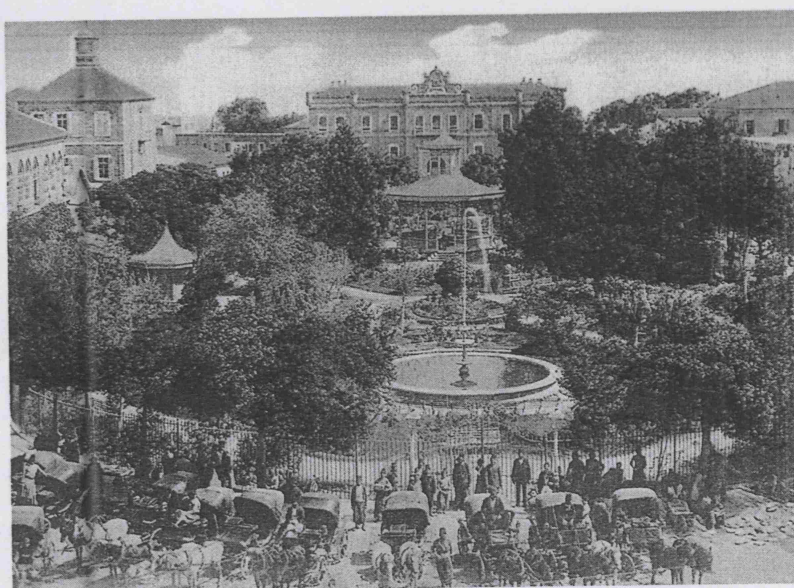
Beirut was starting to recover from an earthquake that shook it heavily in 1759, to suffer additional destruction in 1772 on the hands of the Russian fleet as an offshoot, part of the Crimean War (1768-1774), opposing the Russians to the Turks. After four months of siege, captain Kajoukov debarks in Beirut and positions his biggest gun between *Bourj el-Kashef* and the walls of the old city, in the *Meidan*. Some historians see in this event the root of one the denominations of the square, *Place du Canon* (Square of the Gun), to the opposite of *Place des Canons* (Square of the Guns) promoted by others to be associated with the guns of the Imperial French Navy sent by Napoleon the 3<sup>rd</sup> in 1860 to pacify the confessional disturbances between the Maronites and the Druzes.

In 1830, a seraglio named later the 'Old Seraglio' was constructed most probably on the ruins of emir Fakhr el-Din's palace, one year before the occupation of the city by Muhammad Ali of Egypt, whose reign would only come to an end around 1840 following an assault on Beirut by the joint forces of England, Austria, and Turkey, damaging its port's towers and embankments as well as some of its quarters.



'In the Mediterranean State-political power (be it internal or external) manages space, dominates territories and as we have already said, controls external relations without being able to prevent the towns-men-citizens of disposing of their time and consequently of the activities which rhythm them'.

Lefebvre, Henri, 1996, *Writing on Cities*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, p.233



Sahat el-Hamidiyyeh in 1890. Source : Tuéni, Ghassan & Sassine, Farès (eds), 2000, *el-Bourj: Place de la Liberté et Porte du Levant*, Edition Dar An-Nahar, Beyrouth

In any case, it is certain that the site of the actual Martyrs square was established from the middle of 18<sup>th</sup> century, the *Meidan* of Beirut, an unbuilt terrain spared for military purposes. The transformation from an undefined setting both formally and functionally into a 'public' square would only occur with the urbanization beyond the city walls.

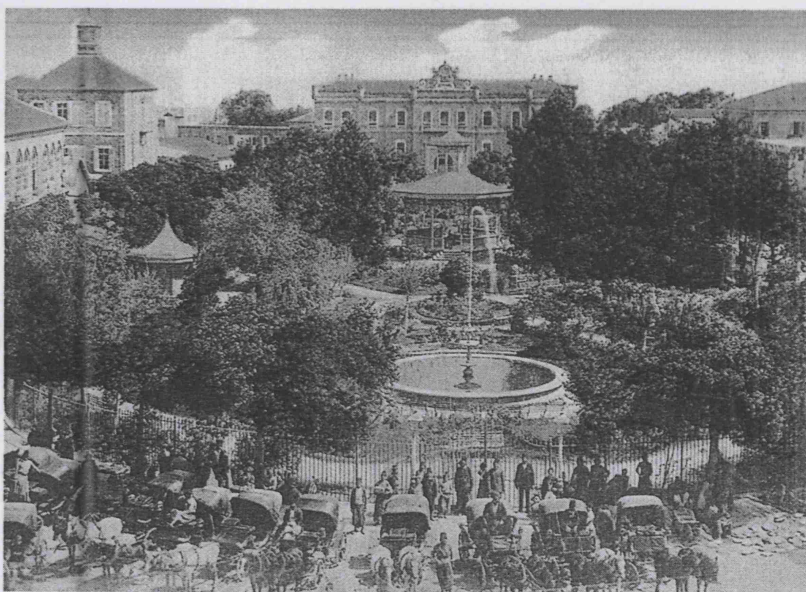
If anything stands out during these first five historical phases, it is, firstly, the succession of destructions inflicted on the city by man-made or natural factors. Secondly, and in contrast to the repetitive, the 'different' embodied in the enduring nature of the interstice, its vacancy.

Fig. 12 Beirut, 1850



'In the Mediterranean State-political power (be it internal or external) manages space, dominates territories and as we have already said, controls external relations without being able to prevent the towns-men-citizens of disposing of their time and consequently of the activities which rhythm them'.

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Sahat el-Hamidiyyeh in 1890. Source : Tuéni, Ghassan & Sassine, Farès (eds), 2000, *el-Bourj: Place de la Liberté et Porte du Levant*, Edition Dar An-Nahar, Beyrouth



## 2. Production 1461 + 43 quote

1840 - 1919 Late Ottoman Rule

Beirut was still under Ottoman rule when it started witnessing massive interventions by European powers aimed at preserving their interests in the region. The city would benefit considerably, its activities being multiplied; particularly following the development of steam based naval transport which conferred a role of primary importance to its port.

Conscious of the repercussions of this intervention on their tutelage over the region, the Ottomans were determined to dissect and borrow the elements constituting the basis of the Occident's power and prosperity. Hence came the *Tanzimat* (Organisations in Turkish) (1839-1876), a series of social and urban reforms intended to modernise and Occidentalize the Ottoman Empire, as well as to centralize the power by diminishing the authority of local governors who were making secret alliances with the Europeans to contest the Ottoman rule. A more subtle objective of the *Tanzimat* was to promote an egalitarian system, setting up the principles of the individual's responsibility towards collective interests; specifically regarding the restrictions of Islamic law which protected so far the private property from any public encroachment obstructively to any urban planning *à l'Européenne*.

In addition to the economic mutation and the administrative reforms, cultural and social transformations were noticeable: individual liberty and respect for the Other were gaining grounds as the basis of urban society, most certain in Beirut where commerce, cosmopolitanism and eclecticism were of rigour.

Beirut was increasingly populated and urgent measures were introduced to respond to the growing densification: in 1860, the enclosures of the traditional city were demolished; three years afterwards the works on the Beirut-Damascus road were achieved by a French company; in 1875, the first water supply network was executed; gas lighting was inaugurated in 1888; the

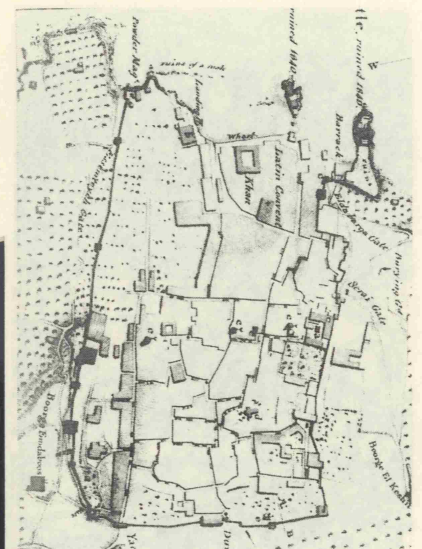


Fig. 13: Old Beirut. 1841

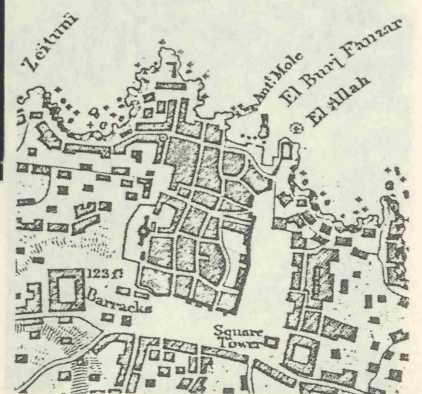


Fig. 14: Old Beirut. 1859

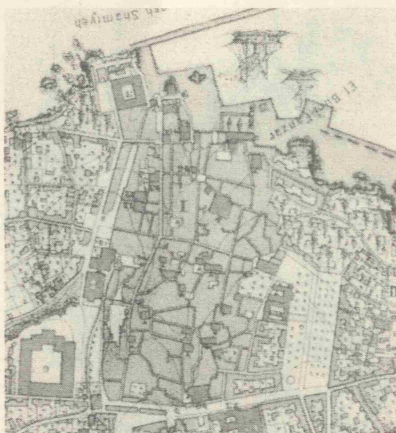


Fig. 15: Beirut. 1876



Fig. 16: Small Seraglio 1884



Fig. 17: Hamidiyeh square in perspective 1896

same year, the Ottoman company of the port of Beirut initiated works on the first basin to be sheltered by a dam; the toothed rack railway doubled Beirut/Damascus road starting 1894; finally in 1910, the first electrical trams made appearance. The planning of new roads in the east and south of the city brought the port closer to the hinterland, and the urbanisation progressively gained the neighbouring hills.

Not only did Beirut become within a few decades the interface between two continents, but also between two models of economy and society, in short between two rhythms.

At the heart of it, the interstice was a metonym of modernity; whether through exhibitionary practices, like diorama and photography, or new technologies like the tramway, opening the city to new forms of knowing, new rhythms.

Martyrs square acted as a hinge in this setting between the old society and the new society settling at the periphery, an interstice between the traditional and the modern, between indigenous rhythms and foreign ones.

So far, It remained a formless setting without particular function. To the north, it melted with the graveyards, a series of elevations aligned to Damascus road limited it to the East, in the south it was interrupted at the level of *Bourj el-Kashef*, and finally to the West it mixed vaguely with gardens cut out by the construction of some buildings like that of the Ottoman company of the Beirut/Damascus Road.

In 1878, a Municipal Council was established, and with it a series of specific urban policies was launched and implemented, the *Meidan* square was to be organized according to the *Tanzimat*. Starting 1879, the square is arranged as a public garden *alla turca*, with fountains, basins, and a music kiosk. Fenced, and with an entrance fee, the garden was used by the middle-class for walks. The new fashionable and refined rhythm introduced by the garden was exclusive.

The old seraglio previously located on the north-western side of the site was demolished and between 1882 and 1884, a new seraglio, named the Small Seraglio (Fig. 16) was built on the northern front of the square, in order to house the government of the *Wilayet* of Beirut.

The garden was inaugurated in 1884 and named *Hamidiyyeh* following the ruling sultan's name, Abdul-Hamid II. (Fig. 17,18)

In the garden, the walking alleys and the wooden and *fer forgé* benches *à la parisienne* brought joy to the Beirutine society and pride to the city's administrators. The demolition of the *Bourj el-*



*Kashef* tower back in 1874 had eliminated the military connotation of the site. In 1910, a wooden structure is placed in the centre of the garden to shelter the orchestra of the Ottoman cavalry (Fig. 19). In fact, the brass band, performing every Friday and Sunday in the garden, organised in addition its repetitions in the music kiosk, a fact that instigated the complaints of the neighbouring residents about the repetitive and thundering play of the drums. As if on top of the usage and perception of the square, the new rhythms were introduced as well through the auditory field. A sort of rhythmic *dressage* operated through the repetitions in the square to subjugate the rhythm the nation.

The square became a covetable address attracting beautiful residences and prestigious companies. In 1982, the Imperial Ottoman Bank invested its Eastern side and would stay there until 1906 when Hotel Khévidial takes over the building of pure neo-classical style. On the same side the Grand Hotel of Marseille is erected, and on the opposite side of the square, the Beirut-Damascus Road Company's building and the Ottoman Cavalry Barracks.

*Hamidiyyeh* square, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was attracting the reverences of the Beirutine *bourgeoisie*, however it still suffered from the influence of its immediate rhythmically de-phased environment. The southern part of the square was already being contaminated by more populist rhythms, trictrac games and narghile's smells from café Parisiana and *al-Kazar*, as well as England's Hotel opening the maze of the Jewellers souks.

In 1882, the souks Sursock, Nourieh and Manchié moved from the old city to the western side of Martyrs square on the previous location of the old seraglio and the emir Fakhr el-Din palace before it. They were specialised in the traditional crafts and consumables, and conserved their ancestral distribution system with the majority of their merchants living on top of their shops. They attracted a cosmopolitan clientele, mostly indigenous and still attached to the traditions of old Beirut, acting therefore as the principle social spaces for interaction and exchange to the difference of the Occidental connotation of public spaces. (Fig. 20)

The interplay between these closed and dense souks maintaining traditions and tending to become more populist, and *Hamidiyyeh* square of modern conception introducing an unfamiliar rhythm, that of the fashionable walks and local power parades, had direct impact on the interstice's function and frequentation.



Fig. 18: Hamidiyyé square in 1910

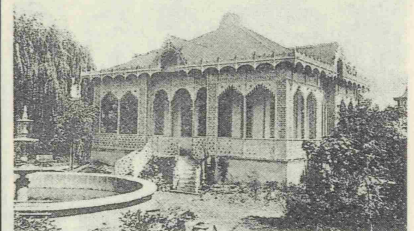


Fig. 19: Wooden structure erected in Hamidiyyé square to house the orchestra of the Ottoman cavalry in 1910



Fig. 20: Populist ambiances of the souks





Fig. 21: View towards the quartier réservé



Fig. 22: Martyrs hanged on Martyrs square in 1915 and 1916



Fig. 23: Public hanging on Martyrs square in 1915

Similar reflection can be made upon the quarters to the east of the square. Populist as well but in different respect, Gemmayzeh or el-Saifi, called the '*quartier réservé*' (brothels or light-district) are typical of similar quarters in other port and transit cities, like Tangier or Cairo where pleasure and libertinism are integral components of the urban landscape. (Fig. 21) They evolved from an informal leisure sector to an almost institutionalized district. It would be animated by day and night by cafes, unpretentious restaurants, sordid hotels and brothels. Its libertine and nonchalant rhythm was competing the neighbouring *Hamidiyyeh* square's rhythm which was trying to set the rules of a modern society's good conduct

Thus the square's rhythm was threatened by its immediate environment; its refined identity was contested by the adjoining populist surroundings. Its administrators were suffering to imprint through it the society which was resisting by making different use of its time. The city failed to manage differences and resistances to Occidental principles. In the interval, the legitimacy of the ottoman tutelage became contested. The claims of the Arab nationalist movements were becoming more outspoken and Beirut became the hearth of a reformist aspirations at first and then revolutionary.

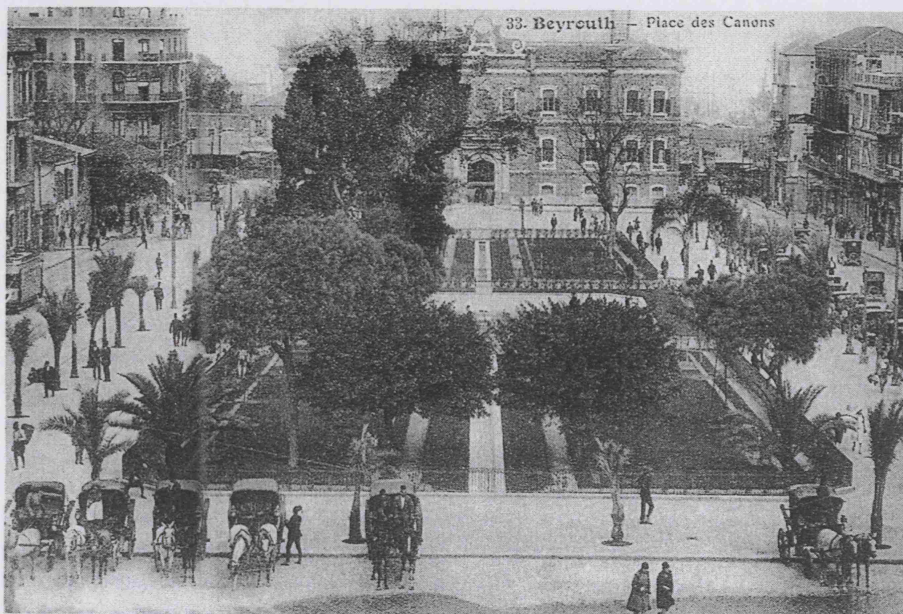
In 1908, *Hamidiyyeh* square was renamed 'Liberty and Union square' following the Young Turk revolution that ousted Sultan Abdel Hamid II and the introduction of party politics to the Empire. Events occurring elsewhere where having impact on the interstice, as if it was updated on a continual basis according to regional factors.

Moreover, in 1914, several Lebanese and Syrian nationalists were arrested and accused of high treason by Turkey, engaged in the WW1 at the time. Liberty and Union square will endure one of its most cynical events in 1915 with the public hanging of several nationalists (Fig. 22,23). Four years later, the square is renamed Martyrs square, its most lasting name, destined to commemorate the independence and freedom fighters including those who weren't hanged on the square fulfilling once more its representative role over the country and the region.

The interstice was experienced as a 'wholeness' from the inside, being in Martyrs square meant being affected by local, regional and international rhythms. Looking from the outside, the region, Lebanon and Beirut were reduced to the square, a representation.

'Political power dominates or rather seeks to dominate space; whence the importance of monuments and squares, but if palaces and churches have a political meaning and goal, the townsfolk-citizens divert them from it; they appropriate this space in a non-political manner. Through a certain use of time the citizen resists the state. A struggle for appropriation is therefore unleashed, in which rhythms play a major role'.

Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, English Translation, Continuum, London, p.96. Originally published as *Eléments de rythmanalyse* by Editions Syllepse, Paris, 1992.



Place des Canons in the 1920's.  
Source: Tuéni, Ghassan & Sassine, Farès (eds), 2000, *el-Bourj: Place de la Liberté et Porte du Levant*, Edition Dar An-Nahar, Beyrouth



### 3. Appropriation

1919 - 1943 French Mandate

Beirut would have to wait for French troops to station in Lebanon and take over the administration in 20<sup>th</sup> of October 1918 on the verge of WWI, and the French mandate for Syria and Lebanon to be assigned by the League of Nations in 1922, to accede into modernity. The historic city would become the nucleus of the colonial city and a profound reform of the society would be envisaged. Nevertheless, Martyrs square won't benefit from these large scale interventions and would soon succumb to populist influences.

The fact that Beirut became the capital of the Lebanese Republic in 1926, coupled with the development of the harbour and industry activities, attracted the migration of rural population to its periphery. France, in parallel, and keen on stabilising its influence in the region while affirming its rank as a colonial power, committed itself to making out of Beirut a showcase of *développement à l'Occidentale*. In light of its previous colonial experiences, it was thought that urban planning paralleled with a modernisation of the administration would be the most efficient approach to reform the indigenous society, and more implicitly of course to found a hegemony. This vision would end up transforming the city of Beirut in the lapse of a few years and force its inhabitants to adapt themselves to new modes of urban practices, new rhythms.

Haussonian <sup>44</sup> avenues are planned, geometrical compositions, scrupulous alignments and organized elevations. The historical centre was squared and recomposed. From there stemmed Allenby, Foch, and Weygand streets, orthogonal arteries of twenty meters width baptised in the name of the French military liberators. The northern coast of the city is turned into the famous



Fig. 24: Map of Beirut. 1920



Fig. 25: Arrival of Mr. de Jouvenel on Martyrs square to announce the proclamation of the Lebanese Constitution. 1926

<sup>44</sup> Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-1891) was a French civic planner whose name is associated with the rebuilding of Paris





Fig. 26: Northwards view of Martyrs square. 1930's

*avenue des Français*, a strip by the sea ideal for walks but that had unfortunately to replace the traditional fishing port of Beirut, substituting once again an indigenous rhythm for a foreign one. Schools, dispensaries, libraries, and hospitals were erected throughout the city, signifying the emergence of a developed society. A particular care was given to the architecture of official buildings, symbols of the powerful and benevolent French administration. In contrast with other cities under their colonial rule, the French dismissed *l'architecture arabisante* in Beirut, and opted for more bourgeois references of the European modern society.

It is in its repartition of the urban population, more than in its quantitative increase, that we can depict the beginning of a new morphology of the capital. In fact, due to geological conditions less favourable to the extension of the city towards the West, the centre of gravity of the city bended towards the East rendering Martyrs square the heart of the modern agglomeration of Beirut. Located at the crossroads of the major communication axis, it would act as hinge between the old city to the West, mainly Muslim, and the new quarters of Ashrafieh to the East, mainly Christian.

On the advice of the French High-Commissioner, consideration was given to rename the square 'Place Pasteur', but the name *Sahat el-Shouhada* (Martyrs' Square) was adopted in 1918; however, the population continued to call it by its familiar name: *Sahat el-Bourj*.

Apart from becoming the geometric/geographical centre of the city, Martyrs square offered to the mandatory powers and the Lebanese government the possibility of a representation on the whole of the city. Martyrs square was the only setting large enough to accommodate the military parades and other official manifestations, sufficiently notorious to dignify the present powers, and sufficiently respectable to tolerate in the same location two forms of governance, two distinct rhythms. Hence in 1926, and after the proclamation of the Lebanese constitution, the Lebanese government moved into the Small Seraglio while the French invested another building built by the Ottomans along the eastern side of the square, as the headquarters of the police, sign of order and discipline. Martyrs square acquired an additional identity henceforth, that of the representation of powers.

In preparation for the *Foire Internationale De Beyrouth* that was organised by the French to solicit foreign capital in the Levant, the trees of Martyrs square were cut since it was to host a large part of the fair's structures. Implicitly, the French were trying to render apparent the economical advantages of the French mandate to a politically agitated indigenous population. On 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1921, date of the inauguration, six pavilions occupied Martyrs square (Fig. 27). Two of them, both of Western design and in circular arc shape, occupied the northern and southern side of the square sheltering the Museum of Arms and the Beaux-Arts section of the Public instruction. The remaining four pavilions in refined oriental architecture stood up for Beirut, Tripoli and Sidon, Damascus, and Aleppo, showcasing their best crafts and industrial products. The Fair deployed the rest of its attractions across the downtown. After the Fair, some of the pavilions on Martyrs square were transformed into cafes-restaurants and their surroundings were invested shortly after with displays. Complaining residents about the disfiguration of the garden would have to wait until 1924 to see the pavilions and the displays dismantled, in view of a reorganisation of the square by the Municipal council the following year.

Martyrs square was reduced into a central composition of rectangular shape, with large paved sidewalks, geometrical basins, trees alignments, flowers masses, lawn, and well tended hues. On the whole an elegant replica of a *jardin à la française* (Fig. 28). The wooden structure at the centre of it would be demolished and on the central axis to the south a memorial to the Martyrs would be erected in 1930. Designed and executed by the Lebanese sculptor Joseph el-Hoayek, it represented two women, one Christian and one Muslim crying their dead and joining hands over a tomb. (Fig.29)

The architecture remained that of the Ottoman era; it acceded to modernity at the rhythm of collapse/destruction of old buildings. Buildings changed hands and functions repeatedly. Hence the small barracks of the Ottoman cavalry that occupied the north-western side of the square were invested by the French army before becoming the premises of Beirut's stock exchange. Finally, the building was demolished in 1931 to be replaced by the Opera building (Fig. 30), the only structure that survived till modern day Martyrs square.

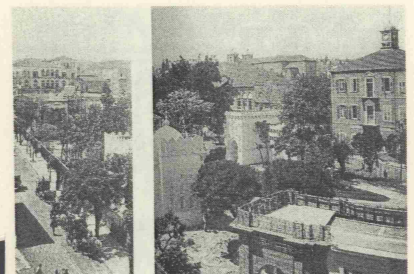


Fig. 27: International Fair of Beirut in 1921



Fig. 28: Martyrs square in 1930



Fig. 29: Martyrs memorial by Joseph el-Hoayek and inauguration ceremony in 1930



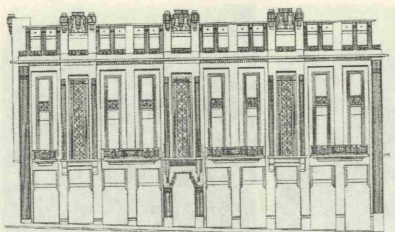


Fig. 30: Elevation of Opera cinema in 1930 drawn by the architect Bahjat Abdel Nour.



Fig. 31: Collapse of Kawkab el-SHrk in 1934

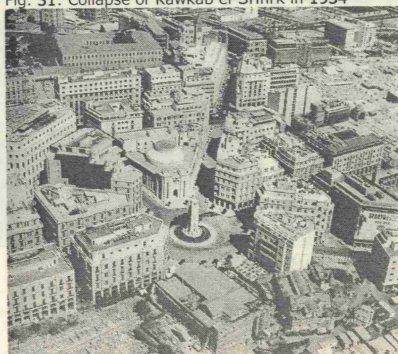


Fig. 32: View of Place de l'Etoile from the East 2003

Similarly, the building of the Beirut-Damascus Road Company was demolished, and the buildings in sandstone and red tiled roofs constructed in its prolongation to the south suffered the same fate. On the resulting plot, the French constructed a large building in reinforced concrete to the Haussmanian model, with central courtyard and multiple entrances, in the spirit of colonial architecture with *'toit-terrasse'*, cornices and organized elevations.

On the other side, the interstice conserved its authenticity but suffered degradation. The hotels that once made the prestige of the square were losing their charm in favour of newly constructed establishments by the coast. The square lost some of its historical residences as well, like the Kawkab el-Shark hotel that collapsed in 1934 (Fig. 31). Motels substituted first class hotels, a theatre was built competing the austerity of the official buildings. Commerce of every aspect multiplied, the cafes extended their terraces on to public sidewalks and the neighbouring quarters spilled their influences onto Martyrs square. The square was animated and beating as the heart of the city.

In this city made of contrasts and discordances, where struggle was conducted between traditional clannishness and modern society, between relics of an Islam fortress and western urban planning, Martyrs square stood out as a federator of antagonistic entities. Square of the power and square of the people, reminiscence of the historic city and heart of the modern city, transit carrefour and meeting place, the interstice of the 1930's nourished its aura from its incapacity of becoming the exclusive square of someone or something. It remained suspended between times and spaces, Subjects and Others, foreign and indigenous, meanings and significations.

In the second decade of the French mandate, the aura that Martyrs square radiated from its multiple functions would be tarnished by the inception of a new monumental square, in close proximity to its West, the *Sahat el-Nijmeh*, or *Place de l'Etoile* (Star Square) (Fig. 32). This municipal project of French inspiration, miniature replica of its Parisian homonym, proclaimed the advent of the Lebanese Republic, the adoption of the parliamentary regime as defined by the mandatory authorities. In fact it seems that the square, of radio-concentric layout, had been designed such to receive and valorise the Parliament building. On both sides of the parliament



stood international banks, maritime companies' headquarters, import/export societies and other prestigious institutions, thus incarnating a new form of centrality, of national politics and financial power. *Place de l'Etoile* will never be able to connect to Martyrs square since the artery that was responsible for achieving that endeavour hurt two mosques and a church, buildings that were still off limits to any urban scheme.

The colonial city was already becoming inadequate to the new systems of transport, namely the advent and extensive usage of the car. In its centre, Martyrs square acquired the persona of a chaotic junction. To the flux of the cars, mingled the two lines of the tramways that intersected on the square, and naturally that of the pedestrians. One can add to that the taxi drivers awaiting the next passenger coming off a ship, a bus, or walking out of the souks. On another hand, Martyrs square was the outbound and inbound platform of two out of three main arteries of the city, namely Beirut-Damascus road in its north/south-east axis, and Beirut-Tripoli road in its west/north-east axis via Gouraud street. In short, Martyrs square was incapable in its contemporary layout to deal with the changes in behaviours and displacements inherent to modernity, and the price it had to pay was a depreciation of its built environment, and a loss of conviviality.

The repercussion of urban growth, insalubrity, and expanding technologies justified the necessity to reconsider the functioning of the city and its periphery. Hence, the high commissariat of Lebanon and Syria asked the urban planner René Danger in 1930 to study the extension and embellishment of the city of Beirut.

His investigation report and planning scheme submitted in 1932 (Fig. 33) had proposed major axes of circulation, building coefficients and land-use studies. It also recommended the incorporation of neighbouring suburbs and villages into future planning schemes as well as regrouping the administration. The urban planner presented a particular attention to the modernisation of the downtown and all his observations regarding the matter collided with the dysfunctional Martyrs square and held it accountable for the general chaos of the city.

It was a node that needed to be untied and for that Danger suggested an alternative circulation network in order to liberate it and allow it to regain its lost qualities. Porticos, boutiques and gardens prolongations were planned to rejuvenate it and most importantly he proposed opening

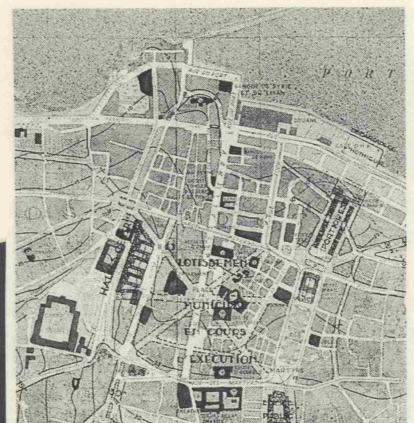


Fig. 33: Danger Plan 1932

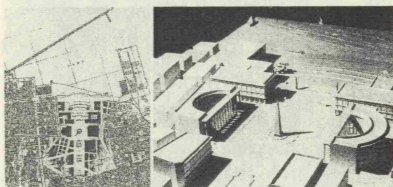
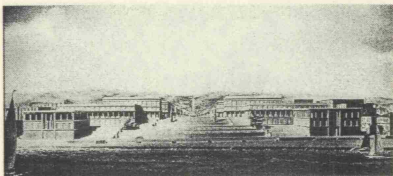


Fig. 34: Elevation, Plan and Scale model of Delahalle's proposal. 1934



Fig. 35: Plan Ecochard showing new roadways network. 1943

its northern perspective to the sea. Rather than approving the plan, the government sought to legislate procedures for building permits instead.

Two years later, Delahalle, a French architect and urban designer, presented a rather flamboyant and flashy design for the re-embellishment of downtown Beirut and Martyrs square (Fig. 34). The plan, perhaps inspired by Beirut's Phoenician site, proposed opening up Martyrs square to the harbour by devising a monumental civic terraced space. Interestingly, the scheme had proposed the central square as the formal gateway to the city. If implemented, the extravagant plan in dimension and image would have diminished the *Place de l'Etoile* prominence.

In 1943, another French urban planner, more associated with colonial planning, Michel Ecochard submitted a plan that focused on the transportation network of Beirut. He dismissed the political and even social role of Martyrs square only to focus on its utilitarian role as a transportation node (Fig. 35). Despite its drawbacks, the plan was the first attempt to incorporate the sprawling suburbs into the scheme, and provided the first comprehensive study in land use.

Beirut and Martyrs square in particular never fell short on blueprints. The devil was always in the detail since any intervention had to satisfy the interests of the various communities, and insert itself in their everyday and within their rhythms.

In fact, despite Lebanon's fragmented political culture, contentious communities could suspend their differences in the face of imperial or mandate projects perceived to undermine local communitarian grip. The experiences of the ottomans and the French, namely with the truncated *Place de l'Etoile* project, were symptomatic of the readiness of local agents to mobilise public protests to safeguard their interests, but also their rhythms.

On the other hand, it should be remarked that this public concern for the production of space and urban management was not, as is often assumed, the exclusive outcome of centralised Ottoman state reforms or the Haut Commissariat of the French mandate. The nascent urban bourgeoisie and a handful of notable families, nationalists and public intellectuals also played a decisive role in this emergent public consciousness.

'The succession of alternations, of differential repetitions, suggests that there is somewhere in this present an order, which comes from elsewhere'.

Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, English Translation, Continuum, London, p.32.  
Originally published as *Eléments de rythmanalyse* by Editions Syllepse, Paris, 1992.



Martyrs Square in the 1960's.  
Source: [www.cmvlebanon.com](http://www.cmvlebanon.com)



#### 4. Neglect

1943 - 1975 Independence

The decline of martyrs square in terms of abandon, as much by the private promoters as by the public administration, started with the Independence and the return to the oriental culture. In fact, the order or the concept of Martyrs square stemmed firstly from the Ottoman will to reproduce western urban models, and secondly from French expertise in planning afterwards. In other words, western conceptions of public space that didn't match oriental understandings. In fact, the Islamic law, which was at the foundation of the old Beirut, didn't recognize public space as a residual space but a utilitarian one. Hence the attraction of the traditional souks versus the foreign rhythms injected in Martyrs square.

Moreover, the interstice used to provide the constitutive outside crucial for the Lebanese identification in front of the foreign Other. When suddenly left on their own, the Lebanese struggled to understand it or to identify with any of its previous meanings. It was not rejected, but it was neglected because it failed to provide a precise significance.

Martyrs square at the end of the French mandate was not only asphyxiated by an increase in motorized circulation, but it had also lost most of its picturesque. Its cafes had reduced their terraces due to lack of space and tranquillity, and progressively the *jardin à la Française* was concretised to gain parking space. It was used as a crossing to visit the souks on its western side or to check out the market behind the Small Seraglio. Its animation was due more to the rhythm of passengers and to the discharge of the neighbouring quarters' ambiances than to its own capacity to generate any kind of attraction.

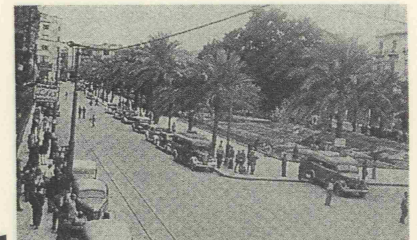


Fig. 36: Paralysed city after the arrest of the Lebanese President and Prime minister by the French authorities ,11-22 Nov. 1943

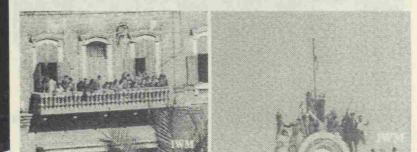
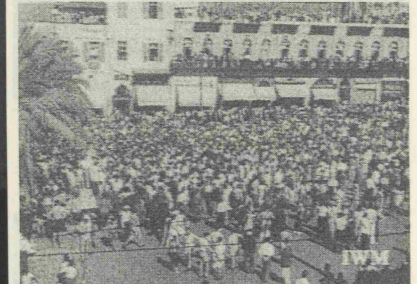


Fig. 37: Angry crowds gathered in Martyrs square calling for the release of the President and the Prime minister. They flew the newly drawn Lebanese flag on the Small Seraglio. 22 Nov. 1943



Fig. 38: Asphyxiated and chaotic of Martyrs square in the 1950's



Fig. 39: Proliferation of cinemas and populist ambiances



Fig. 40: Cafes

Since 1943, Lebanon was an independent state and its capital needed to develop and modernise itself to establish its rank on the ensemble of the Middle East. Beirut was carried by a spectacular economic growth due in part to the monopoly of its port and airport on the entire oriental coast of the Mediterranean and on the other hand due to its liberal economic regime. It was the transit city *par excellence*, and its financial power and competence propelled it to height of regional metropolis.

The downtown struggled to cope with the concomitant overpopulation, and in the absence of urban planning, it fell prey to real estate speculators. Anarchically, additional floors were added on top of the old buildings, remaining vacant plots were built over, and internal courtyards were appropriated and exploited.

Caught up in this devouring urbanization, Martyrs square enclosed itself in the landscape of the old city to finally isolate itself from the modern world that was taking shape in its surroundings (Fig. 38). It had ceased to host any official building, any bank, any prestigious establishment, any hotel of superior category, not a single luxurious residence and not even brand name commerce anymore. This fold was more the less flagrant with the advent in the 50's of a new commercial centre to West of the city, Hamra. It subjugated the historical centre of the city, including *Place de l'Etoile* to rude competition and was responsible for their degradation and impoverishment.

The interstice had definitely lost its role of the geometric centre of the city. Symbolic centre? Maybe a little still, but an obsolete one, since if the veritable symbol of the time was prosperity, than Hamra was the new symbolic centre. What remained for Martyrs square was to fulfil the role of the centre of the historical and populist city during the following three decades preceding the Lebanese civil war. (Fig. 39, 40)

However, it had originally developed outside the doors of the medieval city, and cannot account to represent the traditional urban typology of an Arab city. Nevertheless, the fact that the colonial city was edified around its proper site, contrasting with the appearance of the International style and modern planning irrupting in the city, helped Martyrs square melt with no hustle in the historic quarter and pride itself as its centre.



The loud environment of its cabarets and cinemas, the impenetrable atmospheres of its cafes and games rooms, the incongruous meeting of its architectural styles, at times of extreme rusticity, at other of an insolent modernism, plus its street spectacles and perpetual agitation, turned Martyrs square into the real Lebanese urban theatre. It was revealing the depths of local culture and soon became a landmark for tourists fond of populist ambiances.

Martyrs square of the military and the politic was already part of the past while Martyrs square of the social and populist was henceforth eternal.

In 1948, the Martyrs memorial was savagely mutilated under pick strokes by a deranged individual who didn't find it satisfactory of his own taste (Fig. 41). An international competition that followed in 1952 to design a new memorial was won by the Lebanese architect Sami Abdel Baki (Fig. 42), but failed to reach beyond the lay of the first stone on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May 1956. One year later Beirut's municipality took the matter in its own hands and commissioned the Italian sculptor Mazacurati to design a new monument. The square's design would be slightly modified to receive the new imposing structure in its centre with its four meters wide base. The memorial was inaugurated in 1960, it symbolised freedom represented by a woman carrying a torch in one hand and holding a young man with the other, and on the ground behind and in front of her laid two martyrs. (Fig. 44)

Meanwhile, the Small Seraglio was demolished in 1951 to extend the square northwards. The prospect of opening the square to the sea loomed once more in the horizon before the construction of the Rivoli building (Fig. 55) a few years later, an imposing structure closing the perspective of the square to the north, ended indefinitely that dream. As if the interstice and its metastable state of eurhythmia was resisting this openness to the Mediterranean and its waves. Indeed, for Lefebvre 'the waves of the Mediterranean do not resemble those of the oceans; a simple but significant detail is that these waves have and are rhythms'.<sup>45</sup>

The square and therefore the city tried to filter the incoming influences from the Mediterranean

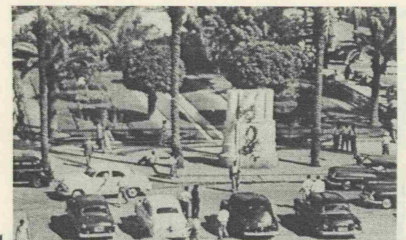


Fig. 41: View of the mutilated Martyrs memorial. 1950

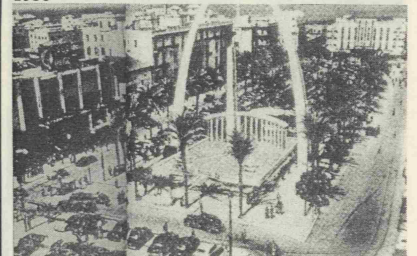


Fig. 42: Winning competition entry for the design of Martyrs memorial. 1952



Fig. 43: Northwards view showing the Rivoli building. 1955

<sup>45</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.91





Fig. 44: Inauguration of Mazacurati's Martyrs memorial. 1960

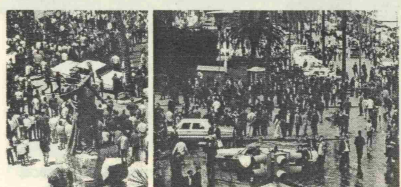


Fig. 45: Demonstrations in Martyrs square

and therefore the West at their own pace instead of a complete openness and break with the past.

The years separating the independence from the civil war witnessed struggles over historical interpretations and national aspirations between the various constitutive communities of the Lebanon. Demonstrations were marched towards Martyrs square in support for or in protest against local or regional socio-political events highlighting the political divisions along confessional lines. (Fig. 45)

The multiplication of demonstrations, of the different to the repetitive, disrupted the everyday and deregulated previous rhythmic harmony. Although equilibrium was recovered at several instances, the prospect of a fatal disruption was already envisageable.

'When relation of power overcome relation of alliance, when rhythms 'of the other' make rhythms 'of the self' impossible, then total crisis breaks out, with the deregulation of all compromises, arrhythmia, the implosion –explosion of the town and country'.

Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. English Translation, Continuum, London, p.100. Originally published as *Eléments de rythmanalyse* by Editions Syllepse, Paris, 1992.



Martyrs square in 1977.  
Source: [www.cmylebanon.com](http://www.cmylebanon.com)

## 5. Martyrdom

1975 - 1989 War

Martyrs square, the traditional souks and even the *quartiers réservés* were united within a populist identity to counter the newly emerging metropolis that was not only neglecting them but aggressing them as well. This resistance is in fact that of the traders of the downtown, of the middle class, of a threatened agreement between different communities.

Together they tried to preserve, inside the universe they had built around complex networks of exchanges, their union, complementarities, and reciprocal interdependences which were the reasons behind their eurhythmia.

The threat was external, from the other city where the relations were dislocated, where the differences grew apart, where the intra-communal hierarchies were specified and where the inter-communal power relations were preparing the basis for divisions.

A metastable system against an exclusionary one instigator of revolt.

Contested because it incarnated a neutrality, a eurhythmia that was unbearable because incomprehensible anymore. The downtown of Beirut was the only remaining place in the country where rhythms of the self and rhythms of the other were not colliding and because of that it fell victim to its wholeness and representation over the region and Lebanon. Starting 1975 it became the theatre of the Lebanese civil war, where bombed messages were exchanged and scores were settled. Alliances broke apart and social rhythm was disrupted. In less than two years, it was ravaged by bombs and deserted by the largest part of its populations while many centuries were necessary for its formation.

While still in denial over the gravity and longevity of the events that were sweeping Beirut's downtown, and in sign of hope the Lebanese administration commissioned APUR (*Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme*) to propose a plan for the reconstruction of the downtown (Fig. 47). The plan that



Fig. 46: Martyrs memorial amidst the ravaged Martyrs square. 1990

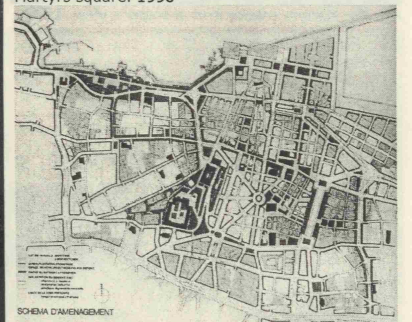


Fig. 47: APUR Plan. 1977





Fig. 48: Martyrs square from a sniper's view. 1979

was submitted in 1977 aimed, amongst other things, to rebuild the Martyrs square as two large landscaped sidewalks with a road cutting in between

However, the administration hopes were misplaced and the demarcation line that would divide the city for the following fifteen years between a Christian East and a Muslim West soon sprung out of the southern side of Martyrs square along the Beirut-Damascus road. The palm trees of the square were burnt, its elevations were rendered gangrenous, and its roadways were smashed. In its centre, Martyrs memorial stood miraculously holding up its Independence torch in one hand while it lost the other, and took its share of shells and bullets.

The memorial and the interstice that hosted it suffered the fate of the event they commemorated: martyrdom. The interstice was stripped out of its social rhythms and was abandoned to its natural ones, invaded by savage herbs, last visual signs of life on the deserted interstice.

Beirut moved from a uni-central configuration where rhythms interacted in harmony to a pluri-central configuration, each part having its own religiously pure rhythm aggravating the dichotomy between the frequencies of the different communities.

The interstice that lent itself to different readings during its physical existence acquired the same understanding with its physical destruction: the end of the Lebanese eurhythmia.

In fact many theories advanced about the causes of the Lebanese war saw in the targeting of the downtown and Martyrs square, this bastion of Lebanese identity in pluralism, the proof that it was exactly this pluralism and tendency to accommodate liberal rhythms that was rejected by the autocratic regional. Unfortunately the same source of strength and richness was the source of weakness, prone to deregulation and arrhythmia.

What has been discussed, narrated, and visualized formed a part of the imaginary of the square but also of its reality, and both were at the base of its symbolism.

My post-war visit to the interstice is now acquiring new levels of reading. Encountered meanings and images are invading my bodily visit of the interstice, while my physical experience of the square is providing realistic depth to my imaginary recollection of the interstice through my acquired knowledge. Lived and imagined approve and negate each other.

'...we do not grasp the relations between the rhythms whose association constitutes our body: the heart, respiration, the senses, etc. we do not grasp even a single one of them separately, except when we are suffering'.

Lefebvre, Henri. 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. English Translation, Continuum, London, p.88. Originally published as *Eléments de rythmanalyse* by Editions Syllepse, Paris, 1992.



Martyrs square in 2002.  
Source: [www.cmylebanon.com](http://www.cmylebanon.com)

## 6. Representation

1990 - Reconstruction

Coming out of their confessionally pure, isorhythmic quarters after fifteen years of suffering during the war, the Lebanese suddenly realized the pre-war eurhythmia of Martyrs square and its importance as a historical proof to the possibility of the coming together of the more than ever disparate communities of Lebanon once again.

In fact, the Taef Agreement of 1989 which adjusted and reconfirmed the power-sharing among the various confessional groups did nothing to resolve the sources of the struggle, namely Lebanese historicity. Hence, the issue of reconciling with the events of then war had to be overtaken. And achieve a balance between forgetfulness and remembrance: preventing the memories from standing in the way of alliances so crucial to collective social rhythm, but at the same time learning from the past to prevent cyclical repetitions of the conflict. 'Both manifestations-the longing to obliterate, mystify, and distance oneself from the fearsome recollections of an ugly and unfinished war, or efforts to preserve or commemorate them coexist today in Lebanon'.<sup>46</sup>

This square that incarnated all the magic of pre-war Beirut, the sorrow of a war torn city, would soon be at the centre of the downtown's resurrection, and witnessed debates about the shape of the new Nation, complicated and cross-cut by ethnic and religious differences and divisions, intertwined with questions of history and historical representation.

Decisions about which events/people to commemorate and which sites to mark as well as the formal aspect of any intervention were highly politicized and contentious, since they implicitly contained decisions about what should be forgotten and unmarked.



Fig. 49: Northward view of Martyrs square. 1994

<sup>46</sup> Khalaf, Samir, 1998, 'Contested Space and the Forging of New Cultural Identities', in Peter G. Rowe and Hashim Sarkis, *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the construction and reconstruction of a modern city*, p. 141





Fig. 50: Northward view of Martyrs square 1992

After the war Martyrs square was thought lifeless and meaningless. It was raised to the ground in preparation for yet another occupation layer, though it was drowning with invisible rhythms, historically real but also imaginary. The metaphoric and the real were in closely set worlds. Indeed, the symbolic and the literal were constitutive of one another.

Its invisible rhythms burst out into openness on 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2005, reminding the world and itself once again of its embedded ability for plurality. Now that it went back into hiding, awaiting new layers, always postponed, deferred, it remained an interstice.

Did this object of nostalgia ever exist? Are the Lebanese longing for simulacra of reality? And how will they rebuild their interstice, is it through a true fake, the faithful imitation of something that never existed?

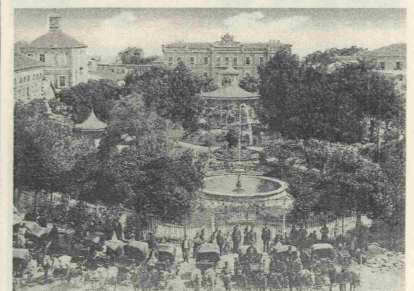
## ending notes

In this historical panorama of Martyrs square, one needs to note the repetitive change of designations and the concomitant formal and functional differences: 'hippodromes', 'emir's gardens', '*meidan*', 'fashionable garden', 'institutional square', 'martyrised square', and finally 'metaphorical square'. Through the study of the formal and functional accounts underlying notions of repetitions and differences, constitutive parts of any rhythm, we tried to grasp, not capture, the rhythm/s of this interstice, and understand the multiple readings/meanings it attracted, weaving on real, imaginary, and metaphorical constitutions.

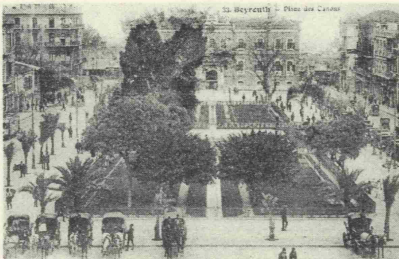
The ensemble of all these functions contributed to the square's formation and to its morphology. Even if we are still unable to prove the existence of the hippodromes on its site, we owe to the Romans their logic in the orientation of cities and the alignment of Martyrs square with the *cardo maximus*. We are possibly indebted to emir Fakhr el-Din and the strict geometrical design of his gardens for the northern and southern delimitations of the square. In all evidence, the definitive vacancy of the site was guaranteed by the necessities of security and defence of the city. Sultan Abdel Hamid the 2<sup>nd</sup> can be credited the interest invested in the site and its first arrangement. Finally, and regrettably, we owe it to politics, hatred, and war a huge part of the symbolic of this square.

The historical study has showed the absence of any linear process of formation and transformation of the interstice. To the contrary, the interstice was found to be the reflection of a multitude of logics resulting from different ideologies and socio-economic factors every time. Even when Lebanon's conception on the whole was maligned/accredited to the Maronites, Martyrs square was bracketed nationally by a loose ownership tag, the interstice belonged to everybody and nobody. Its meaning stemmed from the complex relationship of its parts, subjects, objects and practices; mirrors of a society and its periods.

Luce Irigaray<sup>47</sup> defined the nature of the 'place' and the nature of self as being close together (in fact being isomorphic). In this view 'our environmental chaos is 'our' chaos, and the crisis is in



<sup>47</sup> Irigaray, Lucy, 1993, 'Place Interval: a reading of Aristotle', in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Burke, C and Gill C.G., Cornell University press, Ithaca, p.59



and through us, not something outside'. Hence the chaotic Martyrs square between the Independence and the civil-war mirrored exactly our chaos and confusion in historicity and belonging. The martyrdom of the square during the civil war showed our exclusionary rhythmic activity, and the current suspension of the interstice in space and time reflects our quest for understanding who we are, where we come from and towards where we are we going. The interstice's oscillation between producers/configurations, users/functions, and meanings/interpretations, never settling down to a cosy truth with the rise and fall of foreign occupation and local changing views towards belonging, was nothing less than the outcome of our own oscillation.

Through its internal wholeness and its external representation the interstice allowed for the self to be contained but at the same dispersed. It almost lulled people into disparate times and locations. It provided the constitutive outside for the self, a vital process to the elaboration of identity. Rhythm emerged through difference, just as all object formation is always partial because always relational.

Martyrs square accommodated, endured, suffered, and rejoiced; maybe not neutrally but passively. It accepted but never imposed, displayed but never adopted. It united in diversity, to the image of Martyrs memorial that not only commemorated subjects that died fighting each other, uniting them in martyrdom, but also commemorated itself, having experienced martyrdom along with the square that hosted it.

Rhythms escape logic, and nevertheless they contain logic, and any new design for the square should be that of its time, our time, and would be expected to host our rhythms and reflect their variations over time and in space.

'The tense quest for a single Lebanese collective memory and national identity would be null and void if the plurality of Lebanese identities, which are 'sandwiched between the attachment to the substratum of the confessional group and the attachment to the superstratum of Arabness, Islam and Europe', would be acknowledged'.

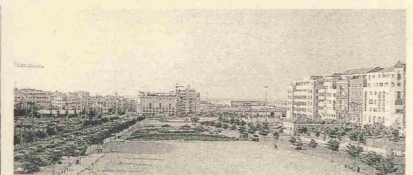
Neuwirth, Angelika & Pflitsch, Andreas (eds), 2001, *Crisis and Memory in Islamic Societies*. Orient-Institut der DMG, Beirut, p.14



We relinquish our quest for a 'single' Lebanese collective memory and national identity, a collective rhythm, and instead we support plurality, diversity, and hybridity, but in harmony. Lebanon's polyrhythmia was the source of its cultural richness, but also at the basis of its weakness because prone to arrhythmia. In fact, the Lebanese State, supposed to guaranty the society's cohesion, compared to other forms of primary loyalties and communal allegiances, has always been an enfeebled and residual institution.

If what initiated the war was a deregulatory instigation through rhythms, whether by regional covetousness or local dissatisfaction, then the return to eurhythmia should be operated through reverse mechanisms. In arrhythmia, or the war, rhythms broke apart, altered and bypassed synchronisation. A pathological situation for which interventions should be made through rhythms without brutality. Intervention through rhythm (which already takes place, though only empirically, for example, in sporting and military training) has to discern relations of force in social relations and relations of alliance. 'Alliance supposes harmony between different rhythms; conflict supposes arrhythmia: a divergence in time, in space, in the use of energies.'<sup>48</sup> In all, the example should be drawn from the living, polyrhythmic body, composed of diverse rhythms, each 'part', each organ or function having its own, in a perpetual interaction, in a doubtlessly 'metastable' equilibrium, always compromised, though usually recovered, except in case of disruption.<sup>49</sup> In which case a group must intervene by imprinting 'un-exclusionary' rhythms through insinuation, not by force. 'In the course of a crisis, in a critical situation, a group must designate itself as an innovator or producer of meaning'.<sup>50</sup>

What is crucially needed today is not a melting pot, but a receptacle, 'a honeycomb in whose cells each of us can place the things he wants to remember'.<sup>51</sup> Not a synchronisation device but a tuner. Not a collective rhythm instigated by a consensual history and historicized collective memories, but interstices where the polyrhythmia of Lebanon and the region can manifest itself and tune in into a eurhythmia; where multiple rhythms, each with their own *mesure* and law can interact in healthy mechanisms serving the same body, the Nation.



<sup>48</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, 2004, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum, London & New York, p.68

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p.80

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p.14

<sup>51</sup> Calvino, Italo, 2002, 'Cities and Memory 4' in *Invisible Cities*, translated from the Italian by William Weaver, Vintage, London, 2002

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